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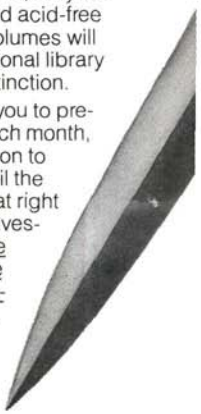

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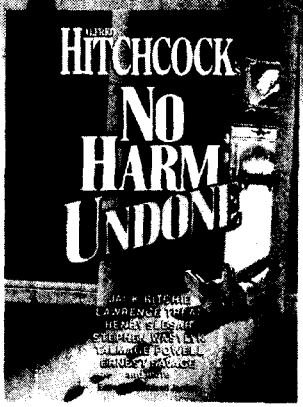

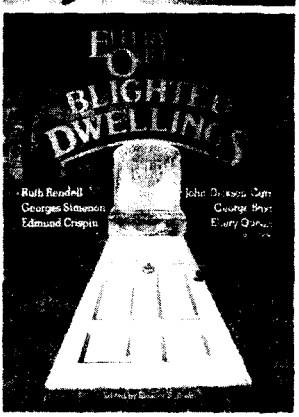

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Naturally I'm prepared to pay your usual fee," Arnie told him.

"I have very strict guidelines," Nick said, choosing his words carefully. The idea of having Gloria's brother as a client wasn't one that appealed to him . . .

THE THEFT OF THE LOST SLIPPER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Gloria had a brother named Arnie who owned a restaurant in Greenwich Village, not far from the street where Nick Velvet grew up. Nick and Gloria occasionally dined there when they were in Manhattan, but they rarely saw Arnie at other times. He and his wife Audrey were busy with their children and Arnie seemed to make a point of avoiding too much contact with Nick. That was why it came as a surprise when he phoned Gloria one Tuesday afternoon in June and asked her to bring Nick to the restaurant that evening.

"After all, he is my brother," Gloria argued. "We've got to go. He's the one who introduced us, remember?"

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Just that he had a problem and maybe you could help him."

"Well, we'd better see what it's all about," Nick agreed with some reluctance.

The restaurant was located on a corner a few blocks from Washington Square. It had been called Arnie's for more than a decade, but after a minor Mafia figure was wounded in a shooting in front of the place, Gloria's brother had changed the name to the Cafe Venice. He insisted he wanted nothing to do with hoods or crimi-

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nals—an insistence which sometimes made Gloria wince when Nick was present.

Arnie was waiting for them when they arrived shortly before seven, and he ushered them into a small private dining room with flocked wallpaper and red-velvet drapes. "It was good of you to come, Nick," he said, ordering a bottle of wine from the waiter.

"Gloria said you have a problem."

"I do. I hope you can help. —Frankly, Nick, I need you to steal something for me."

"I don't—"

"There's no need for pretense. I've known about it for years. Some of my best customers have been your clients, and naturally they've mentioned you to me." He had a way of squinting as he spoke that reminded Nick of Gloria. The expression was attractive on her, less so on her brother's craggy features. Arnie was five years older than his sister, in his mid-forties, and beginning to show signs of middle age. "Naturally I'm prepared to pay your usual fee."

"I have very strict guidelines," Nick said, choosing his words carefully. The idea of having Gloria's brother as a client wasn't one that appealed to him.

"I know—you never steal anything of value. What I want you to steal is a shoe, a left shoe to be exact. A pink woman's pump with a three-inch heel and pink straps. The pair cost less than twenty-five dollars new, so you can see that one of them alone would be virtually worthless."

"Do you have the other one, so I could see exactly what it looks like?"

"No, I don't."

"Have you ever seen the shoes?"

"Yes, she's worn them in here."

The wine arrived and they ceased talking while it was opened. When the waiter had departed, Gloria complimented her brother. "This tastes expensive, Arnie."

"Only the best for you, Sis. What about it, Nick? Is it a deal?"

"Where is this shoe now?"

"In the safe of a lawyer named Frederick Junis. He has an office on the thirty-first floor of the Regal Building on Wall Street."

"Getting into a safe won't be easy. He must think this shoe is pretty valuable."

Arnie shrugged. "He's sentimental. It belonged to a girl he knew."

"What happened to her?"

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"She ran away."

"And left her shoe? Sounds like Cinderella."

Arnie's eyebrows lifted a bit. "It does, doesn't it? I hadn't thought of that."

"There's nothing valuable hidden in the shoe? No microfilmed plans of atomic secrets?"

"Nothing like that. It's just a shoe. I'm willing to pay you twenty-five grand to get it back."

"We couldn't take your money," Gloria told him, much to Nick's astonishment.

"I'd insist," Arnie told Nick, "if you get me the shoe."

"We can talk about money later," Nick said. "For now, I'll need to know the name of this young woman who ran off without her left shoe."

Arnie hesitated, then replied, "Her name is Sophie Morris. She's done some modeling. You have seen her on the cover of some women's magazines."

Nick made a note of the name. "How soon do you need this shoe?"

"I *need* it today. I'll settle for this weekend."

Nick took a sip of his wine. "I won't make any promises."

"I will, Arnie," Gloria assured him. "Nick will get it for you."

"Fine! Now let's have something to eat."

Nick was silent during much of the drive home. Finally, as their car left The Bronx behind and headed north through Westchester, Gloria asked, "All right, Nicky, what did I do wrong?"

"You promised him I'd deliver by the weekend, and you offered to do it without a fee. Is that enough?"

"He's my brother! Heaven knows we haven't gone out of our way to be friendly to him these last twenty years. You probably haven't seen him more than a dozen times outside the restaurant."

"I don't like doing jobs for relatives."

"How do you know? You've never done one before!"

"You know the risks in the work I do," he replied. "Sometimes things don't work out quite right. I've had clients killed, or defrauded of money. Once I collected a double fee, another time I got no fee at all. I like to keep my options open, and I like to have an escape route if things get hot. Working for your brother ties me down too much." He sighed. "But I suppose I have no choice. I just wish Arnie had been a little more honest about what he wants."

"Honest? What makes you think he wasn't?"

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"He described this Sophie Morris as a successful model. Is a cover model the type to wear twenty-five-dollar shoes?"

On Wednesday morning, Nick drove back to the city, leaving his car in an expensive midtown garage and taking the subway the rest of the way to Wall Street. The Regal Building was near the Stock Exchange, within sight of the twin-towered World Trade Center. Riding the high-speed elevator to the thirty-first floor, he found himself in the company of young men in three-piece suits and women in tailored pinstripes carrying briefcases. It was the world of high finance, and though he'd dressed for it himself he still felt out of place.

The entire thirty-first floor was given over to the law firm of Denton, Blaine, & Junis. Nick stepped from the elevator directly into the reception area, facing a bright-faced young woman behind a kidney-shaped desk.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"Mr. Frederick Junis?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I think he'll see me if you give him this card." He gave her a business card with his name and the phone number of an answering service he sometimes used. In one corner he had written: Re Sophie Morris.

The receptionist accepted the card and said, "He's with a client right now. Please have a seat."

Nick sank into a plush sofa that ran along one wall of the large reception area. A glass-topped coffee table held a variety of legal publications and the morning edition of *The Wall Street Journal.* Nick chose the latter and became engrossed in an article about world oil prices. The reception area was a busy place. He watched the comings and goings with half an eye, aware that his card had been passed to a red-haired secretary who disappeared through a door.

Presently the receptionist came over. "Mr. Velvet, Mr. Junis can see you at eleven o'clock, if you care to wait."

He glanced at his watch. "That will be fine."

At 10:45, a dark-haired young woman in a white smock emerged from the elevator pushing a large coffee-cart piled with an urn, milk, sugar, doughnuts, napkins, and paper cups. She rang a little bell and almost at once a line of secretaries began to form, interspersed with a few hardy males who believed in getting their own coffee. There was much chatting and bantering back and forth, giving Nick

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an opportunity to study the people who worked at Denton, Blaine, & Junis. The red-haired woman he assumed to be Junis's secretary came out and bought three cups of coffee she carried away on a small tray. She didn't glance in his direction.

It was after eleven before everyone had been served and the young woman pushed the coffee-cart back onto the elevator, skillfully wedging the door open with one sneakered foot. Just as Nick grew impatient with waiting, the redhead reappeared.

"Mr. Velvet? I'm Marcia Wilcox, Mr. Junis's secretary. Would you follow me, please?"

She led him into a large office trimmed with warm oak paneling that offered a postcard view of the Statue of Liberty in the harbor. In keeping with the scene, the decor of the office was nautical. Nick quickly took in the framed Nineteenth Century paintings of sailing ships and wondered if the lawyer's safe might be behind one of them.

Frederick Junis was a slender, dark-haired man in his mid-forties who seemed dwarfed by the office and his massive desk. Perhaps he realized this, because he immediately came out from behind it and led Nick to a less formal conversation area at the side of the room.

"I'm sorry I can't give you much time, Mr. Velvet. I have another client arriving soon. Your card mentioned Sophie Morris. Do you know her?"

"Not personally," Nick told the attorney. "I'm a private detective and I've been hired to find her."

"By whom?"

"I'm not at liberty to answer that. Do you have any idea where she's living now?"

Junis eyed him uncertainly, as if weighing how much information he should reveal. "Sophie is something of a mystery woman, as you may know," he answered carefully. "I don't have an address for her."

"I understand she did some modeling."

"Off and on. Her agency hasn't been able to reach her, either." Junis was toying nervously with a pencil, but suddenly put it down as if he'd made a decision. "I can confirm that she's missing, Mr. Velvet. She disappeared from this very office a week ago today."

"Oh?"

"This is awkward for me to discuss. She'd gotten in here somehow, unannounced, and I surprised her going through my files. She fled out my private entrance to the hall. I ran after her but she'd disappeared."

"What was she after in your files?" Nick urged.

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"It involves a lawsuit I'm not at liberty to discuss. I only mention the incident to describe the last time I saw her."

"When she ran out of the office, did she leave anything behind?"

Frederick Junis's eyes sharpened. "Sophie sent you, didn't she?"

"No. I don't know the woman—I've never laid eyes on her. I just thought she might have dropped her purse or something if she left that quickly."

"To my knowledge she wasn't carrying a purse. And she left nothing that would help to find her."

"What was she wearing?"

"A white dress with a wide pink belt and matching pink shoes."

"Was anything taken from your files?"

"I don't believe so. I saw nothing in her hands as she ran out and slammed the door." His eyes shifted as if he'd been caught in a lie.

Nick felt frustrated. The lawyer wasn't about to admit Sophie had left a shoe behind, let alone that he'd hidden it away in his office safe. "What about—"

"I really can't give you any more time, Mr. Velvet."

Before Nick could argue further, there was a gentle tap on the door and Marcia Wilcox appeared. "Pardon me, Mr. Junis. Are you free for a conference with Mr. Denton?"

"I can give him a few minutes. Let me check the reception room first. I'm expecting a client."

Marcia turned to Nick. "Can you find your way out, Mr. Velvet?"

"I think so."

As he stepped into the elevator, Nick saw Junis speaking to the receptionist. No one was waiting on the luxurious sofa. If there really was a client due, he or she hadn't yet put in an appearance.

Gloria was anxious to hear all the details, but there was little for Nick to tell her. "I can't get a grip on it," he admitted. "This model has disappeared, but I don't know why that's important. Or how it involves your brother."

"Do you think Arnie's cheating on Audrey, having an affair with this Sophie?"

"I have no idea. But if I'm going to steal that shoe, I have to know a bit more about what's going on."

In the morning, he found Arnie at the Cafe Venice. Nick had two shoe boxes, which he placed on the bar. Arnie paused in his task of taking inventory of the liquor. "Hey, did you get it, Nick?"

"Not yet. I'm no safecracker, Arnie. I have to trick him into open-

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ing that safe, and so far I haven't succeeded. I need more information about Sophie Morris. All Junis will admit is that she's missing."

"You spoke with him?"

"Don't worry, I was discreet. But right now I need something less discreet from you."

Arnie picked up a shot glass and started polishing it absently with a bar rag. "You know, Nick, I was a bartender here before I raised enough money to buy the place."

"I remember."

"Fancy lawyers like Frederick Junis aren't my style."

"How about fancy models like Sophie Morris?"

He shook his head. "There is no Sophie Morris, Nick."

"You'd better explain that."

"It's a long story," Arnie said with a sigh.

"I've got all the time in the world, Arnie."

"Then come on, let's sit down and talk. Want a drink?"

"Just a beer."

Arnie opened two and carried them to a table. "I suppose I'd better start at the beginning. I'm being sued by a man named Thomas Grayson. Drinking in here one night, he fell and knocked his head on the bar rail. You know how these liability suits are these days. He claims to have suffered permanent damage to his back and is suing me for over a million dollars. That's more than my insurance covers. If I lose the case, I'll have to sell the place."

"And Frederick Junis is representing Grayson in the lawsuit?"

"That's it."

"Strange. A big Wall Street firm like that doesn't usually go in for ambulance chasing."

"That's exactly what I thought. I began to suspect there was something else behind it, especially when Junis and his client refused a generous out-of-court settlement by my insurance company."

"Where does Sophie Morris fit in?"

"It's not what you think," Arnie was quick to tell him. "I'm not sleeping with her—though the thought has crossed my mind. She's a beauty, with long blonde hair. She's like a lot of my customers. People who live in this section of the Village are either on their way up or down. I don't know what she is. She's done some acting and modeling but it hasn't amounted to much except for a few covers. I think she had a drug problem for a year or so. Anyway, I happened to tell her about my troubles with Junis one night and she said she

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thought she could help. I don't know what gave her that idea, but I was at my wit's end and I accepted her offer."

"Her idea of helping was to sneak into Junis's office and go through his files?"

Arnie nodded. "But I didn't realize that at first. She went there posing as a client, to get the layout of his office. Then she sneaked in one morning last week and was looking for my file when he caught her at it. She managed to escape but lost a shoe doing it."

"The twenty-five-dollar shoes. I wondered about that. I guess you were right when you said things weren't going too well for her."

"She got away from Junis, but when he saw which file she was after he guessed that I was involved. He phoned me with all sorts of threats and said he'd have her arrested when he found her. He told me he'd locked her shoe in his safe as evidence to prove his story to the police. Hell, Nick, I couldn't let the girl go to jail on my account."

"So you hired me to steal the shoe. Has Sophie contacted you?"

"Just once. She told me what happened and that's all. I think she's been in hiding since then. Anyway, I have no idea how to contact her."

"But you're willing to pay me twenty-five grand for that shoe."

"Like I said, Nick, I can't let her go to jail over this."

Nick reached over and opened the shoeboxes he'd brought along. "You said she's worn the pink shoes in here. Take a look at these four samples I brought along. They're all cheap pink shoes with three-inch heels."

"I don't know her size."

"Never mind the size. Just look at them for the style."

Arnie reached out and studied each shoe. "Not these two—and not this one. This is the closest, but I don't know if the shape of the strap is quite right. Hell, Nick, I wasn't down on the floor studying her feet."

"All right, it'll have to do for my purpose."

"Which is—?"

"To earn my money. If Junis thinks I have the shoe, he'll open the safe to check on the one he has. I'll be in touch, Arnie."

When Nick called home that afternoon, Gloria had some surprising news. "I checked the answering service and you had a call from Frederick Junis. He wants you to phone him."

"Junis? All right, I'd better see what he wants."

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He called the law office and waited until Junis came on the line. "I'm glad I was able to reach you, Mr. Velvet. The number on your card is merely an answering service."

"I'm out a lot," Nick explained. "What can I do for you?"

"I've spoken with Mr. Denton and he agrees that we need the services of a private detective. Since you're already involved in the matter of Sophie Morris, we'd like to hire you for an auxiliary investigation into her disappearance."

"That could be a conflict of interest," Nick answered carefully.

"I don't think so. Could you come in this afternoon and talk about it?"

Nick glanced at his watch. It was just past two o'clock. "I could be there around four if that's not too late."

"It's fine. We'll look for you then."

Nick wondered what he was getting into and decided some research was called for. There wasn't much he could do in two hours, but at the library he managed to establish that Sophie Morris wasn't listed in any of the New York phonebooks nor in *The New York Times Index*. Craig Denton, senior partner of Denton, Blaine, & Junis, was in the Index, however. The year-old article Nick found on microfilm detailed some real-estate dealings in lower Manhattan.

He was about to leave when another name came to mind. He checked the phonebook for the address of Thomas Grayson and copied down a number on West Seventeenth Street. Frederick Junis's client might be able to shed some light on the whole business. But first he had the four o'clock appointment with Junis himself.

The reception area on the thirty-first floor was empty except for the same young woman behind the kidney-shaped desk. "Nick Velvet to see Mr. Junis," he said.

"Oh, yes. You'll be meeting Mr. Junis in Mr. Denton's office."

Marcia Wilcox appeared to escort him down the thickly carpeted corridor. "Right in here, please," she said, then closed the door behind him after he entered.

Frederick Junis stood next to a white-haired man who remained seated. "This is Craig Denton, Nick Velvet."

Nick shook the senior partner's firm hand. "I'm pleased you could come," Denton told him. "Fred told me he spoke with you yesterday morning and that you're investigating the disappearance of Miss Morris."

"That's correct."

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Denton turned his head toward Junis and the younger man took up the story. "I wasn't completely frank with you yesterday, Velvet. The truth of the matter is, Sophie Morris disappeared from just outside my office."

"You told me that."

"No—I mean she quite literally vanished—faded into thin air."

"Maybe you'd better go over this slowly," Nick suggested.

"I was in here with Craig. It must have been around eleven, wasn't it?"

"Quarter to," Denton said.

"I needed some contracts from my files and I went back to my office. As soon as I opened the door, I saw her bent over the files."

Nick interrupted. "And you knew her."

"She'd presented herself to me as a client on the previous afternoon. She said she wanted a will drawn up. I told her one of the junior partners in our estates section could help her, but she asked my advice on some bequests. It was all strictly routine and I realized later that she used it as a sham to learn the exact location of my files."

"What happened after she ran out?"

"I saw she'd been into the file on a negligence suit we're pursuing, *Grayson versus the Cafe Venice,* before I went after her. The private door to my office opens onto a short corridor with two other doors. One leads to the ladies' room, which was occupied, the other back into the reception area. A dozen witnesses there swore they never saw her. She had to have vanished in that corridor."

"That's hardly possible," Nick said. "Without even looking at the place I can think of a number of answers. She went into the ladies' room, or she hid behind the door as you opened it, or she walked through the reception room without being noticed."

"My own secretary, Marcia, was in the ladies' room and swears no one else entered. When I show you the corridor, you'll see there's no room behind the door. And she could hardly have escaped notice by a dozen people in the reception area—especially since she'd have been hobbling on one high heel. She lost her other shoe in the corridor by the ladies'-room door."

"A shoe!" Nick said, acting surprised. "Let's have a look at it."

"No need for that," Junis said. "It's locked in my safe."

"Let me speak to your secretary, then."

"Of course." The lawyer stepped outside and returned in a moment with Marcia Wilcox.

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"Could you tell me your version of what happened last week?" Nick asked.

The young woman sat down and crossed her long legs. She seemed to enjoy the attention.

"You mean about the mystery woman? I was on my coffee break and slipped into the ladies' room for a second. No one else was there, but then I heard a noise at the door, as if someone had started to come in and then changed her mind. I looked out just as Mr. Junis came through the private door to his office. There was this pink high-heeled shoe on the floor by the ladies'-room door. He picked it up and asked me if she was inside. I said no, but he wanted to look anyhow. Then he went through to the reception room and asked Jennie—that's our receptionist—if Miss Morris had come out that way. She insisted no one had come out. What's more, she swore she hadn't even gone in. She hadn't allowed anyone into Mr. Junis's office, and neither had I."

Nick nodded. "She could have entered the way she left, through that private door. It's unlocked, isn't it?"

"Well, yes," Junis conceded. "But it can only be reached from the reception area, in full view of—"

"What about the stairs to the other floors?"

"This building is very security-conscious. All the fire doors have alarms that ring if they're opened. Nothing rang that day, so she didn't use any stairs."

"If I could see that shoe it might help," Nick suggested.

"Find me the foot it goes on and I'll produce the shoe."

Nick decided on a different approach. "What about this file she was so interested in?"

"A routine liability suit. Man injured himself in a bar."

"I didn't know law firms like this one handled routine liability suits."

"There are special circumstances here," Craig Denton said without further explanation.

"Just find the Morris woman for us," Junis instructed Nick. "We'll take care of the rest."

Nick decided to make a final try for the shoe on Friday morning, but first he wanted to call on the plaintiff in the lawsuit. Although Thomas Grayson wasn't directly involved in the Cinderellalike flight of the mysterious Sophie Morris, the whole thing tied together somehow. Nick hated to think Gloria's brother was more deeply

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involved than he admitted, but the possibility had to be considered. Nick wanted to learn if Grayson was merely an innocent victim of an accident or part of a murkier plot.

It was the evening rush hour by the time he located the apartment building on West Seventeenth Street. Grayson lived on the tenth floor, and Nick had no trouble blending with the building's residents as he rode the elevator up. He hadn't especially expected Grayson to be at home, and when his knock went unanswered he started to turn away. But then the door opened an inch and a woman's voice asked, "What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Thomas Grayson," Nick said. "I'm from the insurance company."

"Please come in. I'll call him."

The door opened wider and as Nick stepped inside, congratulating himself on the success of his simple deception, he suddenly saw a flash of long blonde hair and he was shoved sideways, off balance, into a dark closet. He shouted as the closet door was slammed shut on him and he heard it latched from the outside.

Next he heard a television set being turned on, the audio up, and after a moment the hall door opened and closed. He shouted again, pounding on the closet door, but it did no good. She'd trapped him like an animal. With the TV sound smothering his shouts, and given the thick walls of the old building, there was little chance he'd be heard.

Finally, he calmed down enough to reach around in the darkness until he found the dangling cord from a ceiling light. He pulled it and saw the confines of his prison. The small closet, barely three by four feet, had only the single thick wooden door. There were no hinges or knob on Nick's side. He tried heaving a shoulder against it, but it didn't budge. A solid kick in the area of the bolt likewise did no good.

He turned his attention to the few garments hanging in the closet—a raincoat, a topcoat, a couple of jackets. There was nothing in any of the pockets that could be used as a tool, and nothing on the closet shelf except a folded blanket. He took a credit card from his pocket and tried to work it between the door and the jamb, but the jamb itself was metal, and a metal lip effectively shielded the edge of the door. There was nothing in his own pockets except a few coins and the keys to his car. The keys were of lightweight aluminum, which bent when he tried to wedge them between the door and the jamb.

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He could hear an early-evening game show on the television and, from the street far below, the honking of horns. He tried shouting again, knowing his voice would never carry through the walls. In his car was a jackknife and a set of lock-picks he sometimes used, but they were no good to him there.

He felt the wooden bar from which the coats were hung, but it was firmly anchored in the walls. Finally he straightened one of the wire coat hangers as best he could and, using one end as a sort of awl, he rammed it into the wood at the edge of the door, at the place where the bolt should be. A tiny piece of the finish came away, revealing the wood beneath.

He worked on the door with the hanger for forty-five minutes before he managed to chip away enough of the wood to reach the bolt. Then he jammed the hangar between the faceplate and the metal door-casing and felt the bolt slide open. He was free.

The evening news was on the television, but he gave it only a glance. His attention was focused on the middle-aged man slumped on the floor near an armchair across the room. A lamp had been smashed over his head. There was no doubt he was dead, and little doubt he was Thomas Grayson.

"It's turned serious," he told Gloria that night. "Arnie may have killed someone, and if he did there's no way I can keep him out of prison."

"Nicky, he wouldn't hurt a fly! You've got the wrong person if you think Arnie could be involved in anything like that."

"The murdered man was suing him, Gloria. He could have lost his restaurant."

"He still wouldn't kill anyone."

"It might have been a young woman working for him—the same one who lost her shoe at that lawyer's office."

Gloria shook her head. "I don't care what else he's involved in, he's not involved in a murder."

Nick remembered the woman's voice as she opened the door, remembered the flash of blonde hair. His only chance was to find her before the police found Grayson's body and linked him with Arnie. But he had a feeling that Sophie Morris, like Cinderella, might be easier to find once he had her lost slipper in hand.

Nick phoned Arnie at the restaurant that evening to ask him a question. "Arnie, when you were telling me about Sophie Morris, you said, 'There is no Sophie Morris.' What did you mean by that?"

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"Just that it wasn't her real name. She used it professionally. It was as phony as the long blonde hair."

"What's her real name?" Nick said.

"I've no idea, Nick. She was just Sophie Morris to me."

"You said when you mentioned Junis she thought she could help. Did she say why?"

"No. I got the idea she might know him, though. She was always needing money. Maybe she'd had some business dealings with him."

"He claims he knew her first when she came to his office pretending to be a client the day before she disappeared. She hasn't contacted you since the other night?"

"Not a word. Can you get the shoe, Nick?"

"I'll have it tomorrow. Good night, Arnie."

Nick arrived at the Wall Street office of Denton, Blaine, & Junis shortly after ten-thirty Friday morning. Marcia Wilcox escorted him into Junis's office, glancing at the paper bag under his arm. "Did you bring your lunch?" she asked with a smile.

"Just something for your boss."

Junis didn't seem especially pleased to see Nick. "I think we'd better cancel our arrangement."

Nick smiled. "You must have been watching the morning news. They found Thomas Grayson's body."

"I don't know anything about that."

"He was a client, wasn't he?"

"What have you got in that bag?"

Nick opened it and took out the pink shoe. "This was found at the scene of Grayson's murder."

"By whom?"

"By me. I was wondering if it matched the one she left."

"We'll soon find out." Junis rose from behind his desk and walked to one of the framed sailing prints on the wall. It swung away on well oiled hinges, revealing a small wall safe he opened quickly, removing the shoe and holding it up to the light from the window as if it were a rare jewel or a bottle of wine.

"No," Junis decided, comparing it to the shoe in Nick's hand. "They're not the same. See—the strap is different."

Then a little bell began ringing in Nick's head. He moved quickly—and kept moving even after he realized the bell was not in his head but in the reception area. The coffee-cart had arrived for the morning break.

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"What in hell are you doing?" Junis gasped as Nick wrestled the pink shoe from his grip.

"It's Cinderella time," Nick told him, giving him a shove.

"Come back with that shoe!"

But Nick was already out of the office, hurrying toward the reception room. There must have been a wild look about him—he saw the receptionist, Jennie start to stand up and Marcia Wilcox, her eyes on the shoe, tried to block his path. Was Junis yelling something from his office door?

The line of secretaries at the coffee-cart parted and Nick dropped to one knee before the dark-haired young woman pouring coffee. He looked at her sneakers and her white smock and up at her face, and held out the shoe. "Shall we see if it fits?" he asked.

"Damn you!" She was trying to push the urn of coffee over on him when he grabbed her legs out from under her and brought her down.

"There was no time for introductions last night," he said. "But I think you must be Sophie Morris."

Arnie ordered a round of drinks and settled into his chair across the table from Gloria and Nick. "So tell me about it. All I know is that the police arrested Sophie for killing Grayson. I hope they don't think I was involved."

"She made a full statement," Nick explained. "When you mentioned Frederick Junis to her, she realized his office was in the building where she worked with the coffee-cart. It's a big building with more than one cart making the rounds, but it was easy enough for her to switch places with the girl who worked the thirty-first floor. First she called on Junis wearing her blonde wig, posing as a client so she could get the layout of his private office and the location of his files.

"She knew she'd only have a few minutes to find what she wanted. Last week she arrived with her cart as usual and left it in the reception area while she supposedly used the ladies' room. What she really did, once she was out of sight in that back corridor, was to take her wig, a pink belt, and pink shoes from beneath her white tunic and put them on. The belt was enough to give her tunic the appearance of a white dress. Her sneakers went under the skirt, where she had a bag like shoplifters use. I suspect she did some shoplifting when times were tough."

"What was she after in those files?" Gloria asked.

Arnie filled her in on the lawsuit and Nick continued. "In the

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beginning I think she just wanted to help Arnie and earn a few bucks doing it. But she admitted she found something more valuable in those files—proof that Denton and Junis were in league with Grayson, using the lawsuit to force Arnie into bankruptcy so they could get this land for a condominium. When Junis caught her, she fled with the papers, removing her wig, shoes, and belt as she ran. Junis wasn't far behind her, though, and she lost a shoe as she slipped her sneakers back on. Of course no one noticed her reappearance in the reception area—she'd become invisible. Without the wig and shoes and belt, even Junis didn't recognize her."

"Why did she kill Thomas Grayson?" Arnie asked.

"She decided the document she'd stolen was worth more as blackmail than you'd pay her. She went to Grayson's apartment to demand money. He tried to rough her up and she hit him with a lamp. She claims she didn't mean to kill him, but a jury can worry about that."

"How'd you know it was her, Nicky?"

"Well, I had a glimpse of her when she shoved me into the closet at Grayson's apartment. Of course it might have been someone else with long blonde hair or a wig, but I didn't think so. Junis's secretary, Marcia, was in the ladies' room during the pilferage, but she was certainly innocent. Of all the people in that office, she'd have the least need of a disguise. She could have removed or copied anything in those files without attracting suspicion. To a lesser extent, the rest of the office employees were cleared, too. There were simply easier, safer ways for them to get at the files. Sophie Morris had to be an outsider.

"But then how had she disappeared? I remembered the time of the robbery—quarter to eleven, according to Craig Denton. I knew from my own visit to the office that the coffee cart arrives at that time. I remembered the dark-haired young woman wearing a white smock that could double for a dress. Most of all, I remembered that Marcia Wilcox had told Junis she'd gone to the ladies' room while on her coffee break—more evidence that the cart was in the reception area at the time of the robbery. Junis told me about all the people out there who hadn't seen Sophie. They were in line at the coffee cart, of course, being served by her after her brief absence."

Arnie ordered another round of drinks. "How can I thank you, Nick?"

"That's easy," Nick said. "Here's the shoe you hired me to steal."

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a *NEW* short story by

BRENDAN DuBOIS

Jay had a sudden urge to break into tears and he hated that weakness in himself. Months ago he would never have taken this from anyone. He remembered the times he had yelled at his parents and friends and colleagues and even thrown a few punches. He knew where his physical strength had gone, but where had his mental strength gone? All he had now was the envelope, and he didn't want to use it. But he would if it came to that . . .

CELLMATES

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

To Jay Hiller it was like his wife Maura was mocking him, mocking his illness and his condition. Today she was wearing one of her Saks numbers, a black-and-red dress tightly cinched around the waist by a black-plastic belt. Her shoes were red and her stockings were black, making her long legs look smooth and flawless, and her light-brown hair and her makeup were obviously the result of at least an hour's work before she'd left the house that morning. Worst of all, she was smoking—one of those long cigarettes with a chi-chi name that was probably In this month.

"I wish you'd put that out," he said, shifting in his chair. His back was hurting again, a dull ache that counterpointed the fire in his abdomen. He looked down at his legs, embarrassed at their stark whiteness. The dull-blue bathrobe he was wearing was made of heavy terrycloth and the room was heated by two steam radiators, but even on this June day he was cold.

She took a long drag on the cigarette and gently tapped some ashes in the tray at her elbow. "Why? It doesn't make any difference now, does it?"

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He closed his eyes from the sharp agony in his gut. How did she get so cruel? "Because it bothers me, that's all."

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently and stubbed the cigarette out with a harsh, twisting motion. Her fingernails were painted bright red. "Someone else has been smoking here, too, Jay."

"They weren't cigarettes."

"Oh. Marijuana."

"They help the nausea. Not much else does."

"I see. Who's your connection?"

"A local guy whose wife's a patient here. He knows a lot of kids at the college."

He wondered at the quickness of it all, how he and Maura went from what they had been to what they were—the insults, the bitchy comments, the stilted conversation, as if they were on a first date together. It had started when he was a healthy thirty-five-year-old, owner of a small business selling burglar alarms—a home in Brookline, Massachusetts, and a summer cabin on a lake in New Hampshire. And he had Maura, lovely Maura, with the sparkling brown eyes and the slightly upturned nose.

Then the pain had started in his stomach, a slight burning that reminded him of the acid he always got after eating baked stuffed lobster with garlic butter. But the pain lanced through him so badly he finally went to his doctor, and after the weeks of tests and more tests he found himself here, on the second floor of a remodeled house and hostel in a small town in upstate New Hampshire. His beard was gone and most of his hair was gone, and when the drugs and the radiation started his body weight started to melt away like a snowbank in March. He had once weighed one-seventy. He was now one-twenty.

Maura looked at him and then looked away, her gaze traversing the room, and her face had that familiar look of distaste, as if she were looking at a stain on her favorite living-room rug. He wondered how things looked at home. He hadn't been home in months. This room was all he had now. There were the two easy chairs, the lumpy bed in the corner, a small writing desk with a telephone, a closet, and the faded wallpaper with the pink roses. Next to his chair was a small bureau, and in its top drawer was a manila envelope. What was in that envelope had cost several thousand dollars, but the money didn't matter much any more. Only Maura mattered, and that envelope would guarantee he would keep her one way or another.

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He cleared his throat. "I think it's time for us to talk."

"Well, Jay," she said, checking the thin wristwatch on her wrist, "I have to meet someone."

"Wait. I just want to know something, all right? I want to know if you're going to move up here this month, like you said in May."

She folded her hands in her lap and rearranged her flawless legs. "Jay, what I said was might. Okay? I said I might come up in June if things settled down. Well, they haven't. Arthur's still having problems at the business and I have a lot of responsibilities at the club and at the docks."

"What about your responsibility to me?"

Her nostrils flared and he recognized the warning signal. "Don't talk to me about responsibility. Who's been handling your bills? Who's been handling the business, making sure your employees don't steal you blind? Who's been keeping the house on track?"

"The same person who hasn't been up here more than four or five times last month."

"Oh, Jay," she said, shaking her head. She reached into her handbag and pulled out another cigarette, which she lit, blowing the grey smoke in his direction. "I don't need this."

"You don't, do you? Well, do you know what I need? I need a wife. I need someone to hold my hand when I'm getting injections. I need someone with me after I get zapped with radiation and I'm sick for the rest of the day. I need *you,* Maura, and I haven't been getting you."

He had a sudden urge to break into tears and he hated that weakness in himself. Months ago he would never have taken this from anyone. He remembered the times he had yelled at his parents and friends and colleagues and even thrown a few punches. He knew where his physical strength had gone, but where had his mental strength gone? All he had now was the envelope, and he didn't want to use it. But he would if it came to that.

"Well, what you get is what you get, Jay. You knew when we got married last year that I wasn't your every-day, run-of-the-mill wife who'd stay home and wax the floor and have supper ready when you got home. I have my own responsibilities, I'm my own person, and I'm sorry. I'm not going to play the gallantly suffering wife and stay up *here.* God, Jay, there's nothing up here except that hospital and a lot of woods. What do you expect me to do all day?"

Take care of me, he thought. But he knew Maura didn't work that way. She needed her friends, her contacts, the two-hour lunches, the

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visits to the stores and the hairdressers, the cocktail parties, and much, much more. He thought he knew her well when he asked her to marry him at the yacht club's New Year's party, but now he knew that she was as much of a stranger as anybody out on the street. Even so, he wanted her.

"All right, I've had enough of this," he said, sitting up in his chair, rearranging his robe. "I'm going to rent a room at a motel in town and I expect you to be up here in a week."

She nodded. "Sure. I'll be up here. Why not? I hear these towns have a lot to offer. Snail races. Beer-chugging parties—"

"You're not taking me seriously."

Maura took another drag off her cigarette. "No, you're not taking *me* seriously. You expect me to drop everything and come up here?"

"Right."

"Wrong."

"Oh, you will," he said.

"Or what? Will you cut me out of your will? Hire a couple of your groundskeepers to break my arms?"

Now. Now it was time, and he felt like ice as he reached to the drawer and took the envelope out. It was heavy in his hands, like it was filled with lead bars. He held it up so she could see it.

"You know what it's like, being up here alone? The minutes drag like hours and you lie in bed, your stomach burning. There's nothing to do. Nothing interests you. You don't feel like reading, you don't feel like watching TV, you just want to get out. But you can't—it's like being in prison, there's a lot of time to think. And I was thinking how you're never here. So I hired someone to find out."

Maura stubbed out her cigarette. "I hope you got your money's worth."

"And more. He found out you've spent most of your nights and weekends with Walt Barnaby, the dockmaster at the club, and Jason Desmaires, our neighbor. The pictures are fuzzy but they're identifiable." I can't figure it, he thought. How come I'm not screaming? It's like I'm discussing her shopping habits. Maura was staring at him with her Ice Queen look, not letting anything show. "So," he said, dropping the envelope in his lap, "my man went into your past, and I must say you hold your age well, Maura, because you're two years older than you told me you were. But what's another lie, right? There are the times you spent at the women's prison in Framingham on drug charges. You'll be on parole until next year."

"What do you want, a divorce?" Her voice was flat.

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"No, I want you up here."

"The hell I will."

"Then," he said, lifting up the envelope, "I'll have copies of these reports and photos made, and they'll be sent to Walt and Jason and members of the docks and the clubs and your friends and hairdressers and anyone else I can think of."

She stood up, her face mottled with fury, and took two quick steps toward him and raised her arm—then she smiled and lowered it, gently placing her palm on top of his head.

"You know, Jay, I was going to belt you one, but I don't think that would hurt enough."

Her hand was cool on his head, and then he felt a slight tug as she pulled her hand away. Grasped in her fist was a handful of thin hair.

"Remember how proud you were of your hair, and how choosy you were with your barbers?" Still smiling, she opened her hand and the loose strands drifted to the floor.

She went to the chair and picked up her purse. "You got gypped, I'm afraid. I think your man missed my juvenile hall time, and the parking boy at the club. Go ahead, mail out anything you want, and I'll tell everyone about my poor, befuddled husband, sick with pain, and how you've lost your mind and become paranoid and have concocted stories and faked pictures about me. And they'll believe me, because I'll be there and you'll be here, alone."

"So that's it."

"Yes, that's it. I'm sorry, Jay, but I'm not about to share your prison up here."

"I could change my will."

There was a knock at the door and a man stepped in. He was in his middle fifties with frizzled white hair and a sunburnt, wrinkled face. He wore patched jeans and a red-and-black hunter's coat. "Oh, sorry, Mr. Hiller," he said. "I dint know you had company."

"That's all right, Henry," Jay replied. "Henry, meet my wife."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs." There was a long pause as Henry and Maura looked at each other, then Henry turned away, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I'll talk to you later, Mr. Hiller," he murmured.

After he shut the door, Maura said, "Who the hell was that?"

"Henry Gagne. His wife's being treated up here for lung cancer. He runs errands for me, gets me newspapers. He's also the guy I told you about, the one who gets me the marijuana."

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"Wonderful," she said, getting her car keys out of her purse. "Was he making a delivery?"

"Maura, I realize he doesn't wear Brooks Brothers, but he's about the only friend I have up here."

At the door she said, "Jay, I hope you can understand why I'm not going to be in a hurry to come up here again."

"Understand? Sure. I'm full of understanding."

After she left, he sat wondering how he could go on, wondering if he could actually do it. But when he looked down at the hairs on the rug where Maura had dropped them, he knew he could.

Henry came back into the room a while later. "Mr. Hiller?" he said.

"Yes, Henry."

"I'm sorry I barged in like that. I dint know she was still here."

"Don't worry about it, Henry. Is it done?"

"It's done."

He closed his eyes in fatigue. "Where is it?"

"In the trunk, behind the spare tire. A kilo, at least."

"Thank you, Henry. I'll give you your bonus later tonight." When he opened his eyes, Henry was gone. He reached over and took the phone off his desk and dialed a local number. When the man answered, he spoke quickly.

"Don't ask me my name," he said, "but I just saw a woman in a red-and-black dress buy some drugs. It looked like cocaine or something. She put them in her trunk and she's headed south on Main Street. It's a BMW with Massachusetts registration."

He gave the license number and hung up the phone, too tired to move it back to the table right at once. She might not have wanted to, he thought, but she was for sure going to share his prison.

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

The Fellowship in Ancient Persian at St. Pothinus's Hall was vacant and under discussion at High Table. "I don't see the difficulty," chirped up Wittling. There was an edge to his voice that meant mischief. Wanton, senile malice.

"Oh?" whinnied the Master. "You have a candidate?"

"I don't have a candidate. I know there will be *a candidate. There is only* one *person in Britain qualified for the position, and that person will certainly apply, positions in that field being by no means plenteous."*

"No, indeed: we are nearly, very nearly unique," breathed the Master with immense satisfaction. "I hope this is not a young *person, Wittling?"*

"Thirty-two, I believe, Master."

"Oh, dear. Very *young indeed. It seems the decision will be taken out of our hands. You say there is virtually no alternative?"*

"No, Master," said Wittling with what was obviously some secret satisfaction. "And I'm told that Sandowa Bulewa is brilliant, absolutely brilliant."

There was a moment's silence.

"What was that name?" bellowed Carmody (who could hear when he wanted to) from the end of the table. "Don't tell me it's some damned foreigner, for God's sake . . ."

"Q"

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THE OXFORD WAY OF DEATH

by ROBERT BARNARD

St. Pothinus's Hall is not one of the most distinguished colleges of the University of Oxford. Its academic record is frankly deplorable—a fact in which many of the dons take a twisted kind of pride. Nor is it one of the younger and livelier colleges. I myself, at forty-seven, am the second youngest of the Fellows. The vast majority are well into their sixties, or older. I once saw one of them reading over a list of the members of the Russian or Chinese politburo, with their ages, and chuckling so much he blew snuff all around the Senior Common Room.

But compared to more normal institutions we are very old indeed. It has happened twice in the last year that a student would begin to read his weekly essay to a normally comatose old gentleman only to find on concluding his piece that he had been reading for some time to a corpse. One of the young gentlemen to whom this happened let out a howl of horror and ran amuk into Burton's Quad, screaming and tearing his hair. The other retrieved his books from the floor around him, placed his essay back in its folder, and went and had a quiet word with Jenkyns the porter. His conduct was much approved.

On the evening this all starts, I sat at High Table and looked around at my fellow Fellows (that is the sort of joke they like) and thought what a pathetic lot they all were. Wrinkled, bald, shriveled, having trouble with dentures, respiration, and prostate glands. With some old people you can say, in effect: "Well, at least they've had a good life"—or an interesting or exciting one. But the lives of these dons made A. E. Houseman's, by comparison, an existence jam-packed with incident. The Senior Common Room was still chuckling about a brief and unsuccessful fling our Mr. Peddie (Divinity) had had with a lady don at St. Anne's. And that was back in 1934.

So, anyway, there we all sat. Macnaughton, the Master, Peddie of the brief fling, Hugo Carmody (History), Pritchard-Jones (Medicine), Wittling (Classics), and the rest who play little part in this story, and who shall be left nameless. And myself, Peter Borthwick

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(English). Oh, yes—and Auberon Smythe, the one who is younger than I. Auberon was elected in 1970, and at the interview he looked sober, discreet, well washed. (He came, we knew, from a minor public school, as we all did.) When he arrived to take up residence six months later, he had hair a foot long, wore kaftans, was into drugs, revolution, and the gay scene, and used language that hadn't been heard at High Table since the Eighteenth Century. We were properly conned. Twelve years or so had tamed him, as it had most of his generation, but he was still spoken of as our Big Mistake.

As we were spooning the last of the cabinet pudding into our mouths (St. Pothinus's is not renowned for its kitchen, either), the Master launched himself, as was inevitable, into the subject of the next meeting of the Senior Common Room, to take place the next week. These little excitements in our lives cast long shadows before them.

"A busy time is ahead of us, I fear," he began in that disagreeable chain-saw voice of his, which nevertheless had a certain authority and ensured silence when he raised it above its normal whine. "And a long meeting, too. For a start, there is the question of Admissions for next year."

All the old gentlemen around him sighed. If they had their way there would be no Admissions, no more undergraduates. They had a vague sense that two hundred years ago this would have been possible and that they lived in a degenerate age.

"No problem, surely, about Admissions," said Peddie as the port began to go round. "They all come up and take the scholarship exams, and then we give the places to the sons of Old Boys as usual."

"You forget," neighed the Master, "that the Old Boys are not producing many sons. Not *enough.*"

"No. Hardly a philoprogenitive lot," said Wittling with his horrid laugh, like twenty French horns doing the prelude to *Der Rosenkavalier.*

"We could always give the places to the best applicants," I said cautiously, for new ideas are not welcome at Potty's.

"I know what that means!" yelped Peddie, wagging an accusing finger. "You want brains! *Brains!* Ha!"

"Besides," said Pritchard-Jones seriously, "it would mean reading their scholarship papers."

"What are you talking about, EH?" bellowed Hugo Carmody from the foot of the table.

"Admissions!" I shouted back.

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"Well, really!" said Hugo Carmody with a knowing wink. He is quite infuriating. He was a friend of Waugh and Acton and people back in the 'twenties, but if he was a dog then, he certainly has had his day by now. He uses his deafness as a weapon, and when we shout at him he invariably seems to turn what we say in his mind into something indecent, making us feel like smutty schoolboys. To shut him up, the Master proposed a toast.

"Our benefactor, the poet-priest Heatherington," he neighed.

More priest than poet, more gentleman than priest, more bonviveur and hanger of poachers and discontented peasantry than gentleman. We drank the health of Edmund Heatherington (1711–1779), whose entry in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* runs to one and a half lines. It was due to the happy accident of his having died immediately after writing the one will (of some thirty) which disinherited both his son and his daughter simultaneously that the college was rolling in money. We repeated his name in hushed tones and sipped reverently.

"Then," said the Master, "there is the question of Elections."

"What are you talking about—EH?" yelled Carmody again.

"About ele— About appointing new Fellows!" I shouted back.

"Really!" sniggered Carmody. "Whatever next?"

We all sighed.

"There are, of course, two places to fill, due to the untimely deaths of poor Purvis and Matheson," resumed the Master. St. Pothinus's is the only place in the world where death at 76 and 81 could be described as untimely. "It has been suggested to me by the Vice-Chancellor that this time we should make an all-out effort—"

There was a sigh. He had lost his audience already. That phrase had put them all off.

"—to appoint somebody younger. To ensure the future of the college, as he put it." He looked around sardonically. Everyone looked bewildered.

"What frightful balderdash," said Peddie, looking from face to face, seemingly quite confident that not only he but all of us would be blessed with eternal life on earth.

"We could make another Big Mistake," muttered Pritchard-Jones, in the sort of mutter designed to call cattle home on the hills of North Wales.

"Oh, God," said Auberon Smythe, "when will I graduate to being just a Little Mistake?"

"I told the Vice-Chancellor," said the Master, satisfied with our

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reactions, "I fear with a touch of asperity, that the cult of the young cut no ice with us and would not be allowed to destroy the traditional ethos of St. Pothinus's. No, indeed! Nevertheless, there are these elections. We have to have a new Fellow in French. You know my opinion of studying *mod*ern languages at a uni*ver*sity, but there it is: the Fellowship is vacant. And then, perhaps more difficult, there is the Fellowship in Ancient Persian."

The Fellowship in Ancient Persian had been held by Harold Purvis, whose death had sent his one pupil screaming into Burton's Quad. Since his death, his pupil had been as lacking in tuition as he undoubtedly was in *savoir faire*, since there was only one such Fellowship in the University. Not surprisingly. Many were the years when Purvis managed to attract not one single undergraduate pupil.

"I don't see the difficulty," suddenly chirped up Wittling. There was an edge to his voice that I knew and did not like. It meant mischief. Wanton, senile malice.

"Oh?" whinnied the Master. "You have a candidate?"

"*I* don't have a candidate. I know there will *be* a candidate. There is only *one* person in Britain qualified for the position, and that person will certainly apply, positions in that field being by no means plenteous."

"No, indeed: we are nearly, very nearly unique," breathed the Master with immense satisfaction. "I hope this is not a *young* person, Wittling?"

"Thirty-two, I believe, Master."

"Oh, dear. *Very* young indeed. It seems the decision will be taken out of our hands. You say there is virtually no alternative?"

"No, Master," said Wittling with what was obviously some secret satisfaction. "And I'm told that Sandowa Bulewa is brilliant, absolutely brilliant."

There was a moment's silence.

"What was that name?" bellowed Carmody (who could hear when he wanted to) from the end of the table. "Don't tell me it's some damned foreigner, for God's sake."

"No, no. Born in Britain. Quite the homemade article."

"But the name," insisted the Master. "It's not—"

"Not English, no. Tanganyikan, I believe, or whatever they call the place these days. Mother was Kenyan, I'm told."

"Then he's not—you're not telling us—"

"Black. Black as your hat. Yes, Master."

"Gracious heavens!" said the Master. "Whatever next?"

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"It's a retreat to barbarism," said Peddie.

"Something must be done," neighed the Master at his most imperative. "I feel the modern world has suddenly rapped most brutally at our door."

"Personally," said Auberon Smythe, "I rather fancy the idea."

It was all too clear what form the idea took for Smythe. Exclusively sexual. He was imagining a splendid black lover. But I felt I had to back him up. "If we refuse to appoint the man," I said, "we would certainly be in contravention of the Race Relations Act."

"Heavens above," said Pritchard-Jones. "What's that?"

I explained at some length, ending up: "If we have no adequate grounds for refusing him the Fellowship, he could certainly appeal to the Tribunal."

"Admirably expounded," cut in Wittling as I concluded, and now his voice had a suggestion of real mirth which absolutely made the blood run cold. "But I must correct you, pedantically no doubt, on one little detail. You have been referring to Sandowa Bulewa throughout as 'he'. However, the correct personal pronoun would be the third person *feminine:* 'she', dear boy, 'she'." And he chortled that awful laugh that sounded like whooping, Straussian French horns.

"But that's splendid. She's not elig—" The Master's voice faded away. This third shock left him looking as if he had heard the opening of Beethoven's Fifth played by massed Midlands brass bands and amplified a thousandfold. He looked at Wittling with outraged reproach.

For the powers that be at St. Pothinus's had been caught in a trap of their own devising. Some years before, when all the Oxford colleges were changing their statutes, recruiting female dons, even admitting women students, we had, under strong pressure from the university authorities, declared all our senior appointments open to female applicants. We (or rather *they*) had done this on the clear understanding that nothing whatever was to come of it. I distinctly remember Wittling at the meeting chuckling his horrible chuckle and saying: "We declare them eligible and we just don't appoint any. He-he-he!" It had seemed to most of them an awfully jolly wheeze at the time. I had no doubt that the Master was remembering this now.

"Wittling," he said. "This is at least in part your doing. I shall rely on you to find some way of getting us out of it."

"Out of it?" crowed Wittling. "Why should I want to get us out of

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it? Jolly good idea. Pretty young black thing. Brighten the place up. Spruce us up a bit, too. I believe she's a very lively little thing—modern and all that. What's the phrase—'with it'? He-he-he."

"Then what on earth is she studying Ancient Persian for?" demanded Pritchard-Jones.

"I'm told she has a Protestant Mission background from her parents. Went up to Cambridge to study theology. Got into New Testament Greek. Went on from there. Lost her religion, but proved a—he-he-he—whiz-kid in ancient languages. Studied Persian at the Sorbonne."

"Heavens above!" bellowed Carmody. "It doesn't seem possible! What are gels coming to?"

"I have it! I have it!" shrieked the Master, a rare and terrifying smile wreathing his aged face. "The Fellowship can be changed. Its terms can be altered. We can turn it into a Fellowship in Geography. Or Spanish. Or comparative Something-or-other. That," he concluded triumphantly, "is possible under the terms of Edmund Heatherington's will."

"Quite," said Wittling. "It is possible—*providing the Fellows are unanimous in desiring the change.*"

"Well?" Magisterially.

"They will not be unanimous. I myself do not desire the change. I must uphold the importance of the dead languages." He sniggered. "I have no doubt that Mr.—er, *Dr.*—" (sneer) "—Smythe, being a *modern* young man, will not wish the nature of the Fellowship to be changed in order to exclude a member of the female sex."

Now Auberon Smythe is one of the few homosexuals who seem genuinely to dislike women. But he, too, felt himself caught in one of Wittling's forklike traps.

"No. No, of course not," he muttered.

"And you, Borthwick," continued Wittling, turning to me, "a liberal young fellow like you would naturally like to see the College open to women."

"Of course," I said, with a touch of priggishness that comes, I think, from my Scottish ancestry. "I would certainly be against changing the terms of the Fellowship if that were the motive."

"Three dissenting!" said Wittling in tones of triumph. "Not a chance of a unanimous vote, Master. Not a chance!"

It was death to the Master's hopes. All his powers of command seemed to have left him. He summoned Jenkyns the porter, who led him from table back to his Residence. As he staggered off, I saw him

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removing his dentures, something he only does in public when he is very upset. The rest of us broke up raggedly and the evening concluded in less of an alcoholic fugg than usual.

I am not quite sure why Wittling did all this. I'm convinced that when he suggested altering the statutes to admit women he had no such far-sighted project as this in mind. Nor, of course, did he have any particular love of women as such. I'm sure no tingling of lust warmed his aged loins, or had since about the time of *Chu Chin Chow*. I think it was just mischief. That's the trouble when you get older. Either you think you're immortal, and this gives you a godlike carelessness of consequences, or else you know you'll soon be dead and won't have to put up with the results of your mischief. If the latter was Wittling's calculation, he was all too soon to be proved right.

In the week that followed, I absented myself from College as much as possible, for squabbling geriatrics are hardly congenial companions. My only insight into how things were going I obtained one evening when, after a late tutorial, I went over to the buttery bar to have a beer before going home for dinner. The door stood open and I heard the booming voice of Hugo Carmody.

"Well, I don't know if the Master has any plans, but I'm damned sure *some*thing's got to be done." I lingered in the twilight outside the door. "If only we could get something on them."

"Absolutely," I heard, in the sharp voice of Peddie.

"Smythe would be easy, what? Threaten to go to the police about his boy friends."

"That wouldn't do. It's not illegal any more."

"What? Not illegal? Good heavens! I must stop slipping Higgins five-pound notes."

Higgins was Carmody's scout. He was reaching retirement age, so he wouldn't miss his five-pound notes. There was silence for a moment.

"Then there's Borthwick. Not much to be got on him. A somewhat *dim* personality, what?"

"His wife is sleeping with the milkman, you know," came the thin malicious voice of Peddie. They chuckled about this like crazy. "But all the Fellows' wives sleep with one or another of the roundsmen. I always said that marriage doesn't *do*. And really it's hardly a *lever*."

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They subsided into silence and I made a bustling entrance. I had a quick beer and resolved to be home more in the mornings.

Nothing much happened that I knew of until the night before the Senior Common Room meeting. My wife was at an Oxfam gathering, she said, and I was forced to eat in Hall. Dinner was uneventful but unpleasant. No one was talking to Wittling, so he was forced to talk to me and Smythe. Given the choice, I preferred Pritchard-Jones, who was at least inoffensive, or even Hugo Carmody, because I was always hoping to get out of him details of a trip he made to Paris with Waugh in 1924. But Wittling it was, and we were forced to put up with his crackling malice, his sly self-satisfaction, his trumpeted chortlings.

After dinner we adjourned as usual to the Senior Common Room. I poured myself a second glass of port and Wittling did the same. Smythe took a hard slug of whisky and the Master took coffee and brandy. Wittling stood by the mantelpiece, and though the rest of us wanted to cluster round the fire we none of us wanted to be too near him.

"St. Pothinus!" said the Master, who had placed himself in the center of the room. We all toasted the patron saint of the College (dead at ninety, in a dungeon) and then the Master fixed Wittling with an eye, bleary but designed to threaten and command. "Well, Wittling, we're all hoping to hear you've changed your mind."

"Changed my mind, Master?" Innocently.

"About altering the terms of the Fellowship."

"Oh, *that*—" Dismissively, as if the matter had passed completely out of his head. "No, Master, I fear that my opinions on that subject are very much as they were last week."

"I see, I see-e-e. So, to satisfy a foolish whim, to enjoy a bit of wilful troublemaking, you are prepared to jeopardize the best traditions of St. Pothinus."

"What did Winston Churchill say about the traditions of the Navy? Rum, sodomy, and the lash? I suppose you could say that St. Pothinus's were port, sodomy, and the third-class honours degree. Personally, I believe traditions should be evaluated empirically. The obsolete ones discarded, what?"

"What you are proposing," snapped Peddie, "is a craven concession to the spirit of modernity."

"Concession?" chortled Wittling. "Not at all. I propose welcoming it in! A breath of fresh air from the contemporary scene. *A propos*

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of which, I have a *picture*—" he skipped, chuckling and snuffling, over to his briefcase in a corner by the door "—a snapshot, I think you call it, of the young lady herself, some years ago, taken when she was performing in the Cambridge Footlights Review. Ah, here it is."

He produced from his case an old, slightly brown copy of *The Sun* newspaper and we clustered round to view a picture of a distinctly handsome black girl in leopardskin briefs, apparently topless, clutching a microphone in the center of a stage and crooning into it.

"My word!" said Carmody. "I suppose that was taken after she lost her faith." None of the rest of us could think of anything more adequate to say.

"There," said Wittling triumphantly, looking around at us and thrusting the photograph at the Master, who was wandering over from the fireplace. "Now you can see that Miss Bulewa will certainly provide something different in the College, what? Can't see anyone paying to see us topless, eh? Except perhaps Dr. Smythe in some dubious Soho locale." He pottered back toward the fire. "No, this *is* going to be a bit of a change, isn't it? I hope she fits in. Do you feel she will? Don't you sometimes feel you've got into a bit of a rut here, all of you? That life is lacking in zest? Needs a bit of spice. Suddenly our lives are going to acquire a whole new flavor."

He picked up his glass of port and drank triumphantly. Suddenly an expression of horror, or rage, crossed his face, which set in a terrible grimace. His hand dropped the glass and went to his throat, a strangled cry escaped him, and he crashed forward onto the hearthrug.

"Dear me," said the Master. "Mr. Wittling appears to be unwell."

I was down on the hearthrug beside him, pulling open his dinner jacket, feeling his pulse. No one else moved. I didn't need long.

"He's dead," I said.

"How unfortunate," said the Master, taking a fortifying sip of his brandy. "Struck down in his prime. In the midst of life. The ways of Providence are strange."

"Providence, my foot!" I said brutally. "You saw how he died! He's been poisoned!"

"Mr. Borthwick! Mis-ter Borthwick! What an extraordinary suggestion! Most improper. You've been reading too many books by—what's that *thriller* writer? —Mr. Wilkie Collins."

"Can't you smell it? Almonds. It must have been in the port."

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"Gad. Founder's port," said Hugo Carmody.

"I can't smell a thing," said Peddie. "Look—I'm drinking port. It's perfectly all right." And he downed his drink.

"I'm drinking port, too," I said. "It must have been put in his *glass*. He'd already drunk half of it. It must have been put in his glass while we were all looking at his damned newspaper."

"Come, come, Mr. Borthwick, let us not lose grip of our logic," said the Master in his unpleasant silken whine. "If we were all looking at his newspaper, none of us could have put anything in his glass."

"One of us must have held back," I said, crinkling my forehead with effort. "One of us wasn't there." I had a vision of the paper being thrust at the Master as he came from the direction of the fireplace. I looked at him and he stared unwaveringly back.

"We were all gaping at it, far as I remember," said Pritchard-Jones. "Handsome filly."

"Quite," said the Master. "We were all over that side of the room. Now let us forget this frivolous suggestion and—"

"No doctor on earth is going to sign a death certificate, Master," I said. "There will have to be an autopsy."

"I'm sure Dr. Pritchard-Jones will have no hesitation in signing the necessary formalities," said the Master smoothly.

"Pritchard-Jones? He hasn't practiced medicine since before penicillin was invented."

"I believe you are eligible to sign the necessary forms?" inquired the Master in his high whinny, turning to Pritchard-Jones.

" 'Course I am. Most uncalled-for remark. Offensive."

"I believe there *was* some history of heart trouble, wasn't there?"

"Think he said something about it once."

"There we are, then. That's all quite clear. There need be no question."

"Master, even if you have a certificate," I explained patiently, "no undertaker is going to bury that corpse without getting a police clearance first."

"Why on earth not?"

"Well—look!" I turned over the corpse. The face of Mr. Wittling—blue, and twisted into a hideous grimace of torment that seemed to drag his wrinkled skin tight over his aged skull—gazed horrifyingly up at us.

"Well, he was nobody's idea of a dreamboat at the best of times," said Auberon Smythe.

"I've no doubt Lockitt will not make any trouble," said the Master.

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"We'll get *old* Lockitt. Not the boy, he's a fusser. Old Lockitt is quite as old as any of us. He's very understanding. He won't want to lose us—we've been one of their most regular customers over the years."

"You are covering up! You are accessories after a murder!"

"Covering up? Really, Mr. Borthwick. You'll be suggesting next that I committed murder myself."

He looked at me, and I, weakly, looked down at the floor. "Well, how do I know that you didn't? How do I know that you're not all in it? Pritchard-Jones, what poison is it that smells like almonds?"

"Don't know, m'boy. Have to look it up in m'books."

"It must have been brought here." I looked desperately round the room. "Look! Here it is." I picked up from one of the side tables a tiny glass phial. "This is how it was brought."

"No doubt it contained some medicament that poor Wittling was taking for his heart," said the Master.

"He did not have heart trouble," I said. "We'd have heard about it endlessly if he had. Smythe, you can see what's happening, can't you? Can I rely on you to support me?"

"Fight your own battles," said Auberon Smythe, making for the door. "I've no love for the police, believe me. As far as I'm concerned, I went straight to my rooms after Hall. Haven't been near the S.C.R. all evening. 'Bye, duckies."

"What did he say?" roared Carmody, but we ignored him.

"Right," I said. "If I have to fight my own battles, so be it." I marched over to the telephone, recently installed in the S.C.R. as a concession to the times. "If you won't listen to me, perhaps you'll listen to the police."

"The police?" neighed the Master. "Really, Mr. Borthwick, if we can't settle a little matter like this without calling in outside authorities, what has become of academic freedom?"

I didn't deign to answer and was just beginning to dial when the Master spoke again, with that authoritative undertone to his whine that always got his point across. "Mr. Borthwick, you really must be careful, you know. I don't *think* you have quite thought this thing through."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well, let us say, for argument's sake, that we are all 'in it,' as you put it a moment ago. It will be very easy, will it not, for us, all of us, to inform the police of a most unfortunate altercation, really quite violent, that took place last week between you and poor Wittling—"

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"Altercation? There was no altercation. I hardly spoke to the man if I could help it."

"Precisely. Your hostility was well known to us. And in an enclosed community such as our own, it is well known how little things can fester and become great ones. There was that altercation, as I say. On the subject of—what was it?—Milton's debt to Virgil? Yes, I think that was it. We all heard it, of course. Now, would the police believe your story, of a collusion between a large number of elderly and impeccably respectable academic gentlemen to murder one of their colleagues? Or would they not rather accept our unanimous view that you—your mind unhinged, perhaps, by the notorious infidelities of your wife—had a brainstorm and decided to do away with a colleague with whom you were publicly on the worst of terms?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Or say our splendid British police discovered that this was the work of one man. Say Mr. Peddie. Say Mr. Carmody. Say, even, myself. Leaving the rest of the S.C.R. intact. You have been so taken up, I fear, with the terms of the Fellowship in Ancient Persian that you have forgotten the terms of your own Fellowship."

"My own—?"

"As some of us here remember, when the Jeremy Collier Fellowship in English was established, English was still a comparatively new university subject. Many of us hoped it would go away. So, in their wisdom, the governing fellow made this Fellowship renewable every five years."

"But that's just a formali—"

"*It has been hitherto.* Quite. We have been generous, as is our habit. However, the Fellowship comes up for renewal, does it not, *next year*. I think you may find that the S.C.R. will not take kindly to the idea of renewing the Fellowship of one who has been responsible for arraigning one of their colleagues on a capital charge."

"Damned bad form," said Carmody.

"Quite," said Peddie.

"Quite," said all of them, sounding like a flock of ducks in St. James's Park.

"You wouldn't dare," I said, but my voice sounded hollow.

"I think you would find that to get a job at your time of life is far from easy. A cold academic wind is blowing, is it not, Borthwick? Positions are being abolished rather than created, I believe. I'm told that even in the Colonies the universities are no longer the refuge

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for Oxonians that they once were. And though you are a great *reader,* Borthwick, you are hardly a prolific *writer,* are you? Isn't that what they want these days? Acres of little papers on this and that? It doesn't bear thinking about, does it, Borthwick? One of the great army of three million unemployed."

I took my hand slowly from the telephone. He had me over a bubbling cauldron of boiling oil. When threatened where it hurts most, our jobs and our pockets, we liberal intellectuals do not hesitate. Or rather, we hesitate, because that is in our nature, but in the end—

I took a symbolic step away from the telephone.

"Splendid!" neighed the Master, rubbing his hands. "I felt quite sure you'd see you'd been mistaken. Sad that the death of a respected and valued colleague should have been disfigured in this way. Now I fear I must to the Residence, to set in motion the necessary formalities." He looked around the room carefully. He took up the little phial from the table and hurled it into the fire. Then he took the copy of *The Sun* and placed it carefully in his briefcase.

"I shall ring Lockitts', talk to the old man. I'll tell him to bring along a certificate for you to sign, Pritchard-Jones. Perhaps you would stay here, too, Peddie, to see if there's anything else? The rest of us can go, I think. Borthwick, we'll quite understand if you are too upset to attend tomorrow's meeting: you have taken the death of your friend very hard, we can all see that. I shall propose to change the terms of the Heatherington Fellowship to one in Chinese. I think Wittling would have approved, with his concern for the older languages. And it will show that we in Potty's can, in our small way, adapt ourselves to the new patterns of the modern world."

And that's how it turned out. We appointed two new Fellows. One was a Chinese scholar of great age and Buddhalike inscrutability, the other an elderly Winchester schoolmaster who was having disciplinary problems. They fitted in very well. Life in college goes on pretty much as before. For a time I did not care to go to High Table. I dined constantly at home, driving my wife to a frenzy of irritation. Even when I started to eat in Hall again, I avoided the port. But time takes the edge off most things. Now I take my glass of Founder's port with the rest, with scarcely a thought.

It's amazing what we liberal intellectuals can take in our strides when we set our minds to it.

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The first witness was Glover's son, Maxwell. He testified that his father was still alive when he found him and that his last words were "The boy saw it . . ."

THE WITNESS

by PATRICK IRELAN

When Robert Dell killed Howard Glover, my father said they shouldn't even have a trial. They should just shake his hand and give him a train ticket back to Kansas.

Our farm bordered Glover's on one side, and my father never could agree with the old man about whose fence was at fault when someone's cattle got out. "He expects me to keep up his fences *and* mine," Dad used to say, scratching angrily at his dark moustache. Glover probably said the same about him.

In addition to his bias against Glover's fences, my father always claimed the old man had cheated him one time. Glover had agreed to buy fifteen Angus steers from Dad and when it came time to write out the check they had different recollections of the price they'd settled on—Glover was sure they'd said eighteen cents a pound, my father was sure they'd said twenty. Because of these differences, my dad despised the old man so much he told me never to set foot on the Glover place.

My father's reaction to the shooting wasn't unique. Almost everyone who knew Glover disliked him. The old man was rich enough, but he hadn't made many friends getting that way. In a community that depended on trust, no one trusted Howard Glover.

Against my mother's wishes, my father took me with him to the trial. "It'll give him nightmares," she said, rattling some pans on the stove. She didn't know I was already having nightmares about the whole episode.

"It'll be good for him," Dad said, smiling slightly at her displeasure. I'm not sure what he meant by that but, anyway, he took me.

The trial lasted just one day. I still remember where Dad parked our old Pontiac coupe on the east side of the town square. The high

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lonesome sound of a Hank Williams song drifted through the screen door of a tavern. Next door someone was changing the letters on the marquee of the Iowa Theater. My mother sometimes gave me a dime for a Saturday matinee there. I'd sit happily while Roy Rogers shot the guns out of the outlaws' hands.

Robert Dell didn't shoot that way.

As far as I could tell, the betting on the courthouse lawn was running heavily in favor of acquittal. My father told a man in overalls that no jury in Fox County would ever convict anyone for shooting Howard Glover. "He did us all a favor," he said, his tanned face rigid with certainty. The man in overalls agreed.

The heat from the sun reflected off the limestone walls of the courthouse as we climbed the steps and walked into the cool hallway. On the second floor, someone had already drawn the shades over the tall narrow windows in the courtroom. The judge's walnut desk shone darkly under the artificial light.

It took about an hour to select the jury, twelve men in work clothes who obviously weren't accustomed to sitting down all day. By the time the opposing sides finished their opening statements, it had grown hot in the courtroom. I couldn't feel the slightest breeze from the old ceiling fans and wondered what good they were.

The first witness for the prosecution was Glover's son, Maxwell, a short broad-faced man about forty. He testified that his father was still alive when he found him and that his last words were "The boy saw it." He swore that his father was unarmed the day he was killed, and the sheriff subsequently testified that he'd found no weapons on or around Glover's body.

The county attorney then called Maxwell's son, Glover's grandson Arnie, to the stand. Arnie was the same age as me, and he looked awfully small up there, with his freckles and green eyes, surrounded by all those grownups. He said he'd seen the whole thing from where he was hiding behind the pond bank. "Mr. Dell told Grandpa he promised more for the calves," Arnie said, "but Grandpa said he didn't." He pushed his brown hair up off his forehead.

"What did Mr. Dell do then?" said the county attorney, wiping the sweat from his pudgy face with a handkerchief.

"He told Grandpa he wasn't going to haul those calves all the way back to Kansas. Then he pointed a gun at him and said he'd better pay what he promised." Arnie looked at his father from time to time as he talked.

"What did your grandpa say to that?"

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"He said he might as well put that gun away 'cause he wouldn't pay him a penny more."

"Then what happened?" The county attorney shoved his handkerchief into his back pocket and glanced at the jury.

"Mr. Dell called Grandpa a bad name and shot him with his gun." Arnie sat with his hands clasped between his knees.

"Did your grandpa at any time threaten to shoot or hurt Mr. Dell in any way?"

"No."

Arnie's story was convincing enough, except that it was obvious someone had coached him. It was certainly obvious to the defense attorney and he soon had Arnie caught in a tangle of contradictions.

During the break before the defense began its case, Dad took me downstairs and bought us two five-cent bottles of Coca-Cola out of a vending machine. I drank mine and smeared the beads of condensation over the ribbed surface of the bottle while the adults around me talked about the trial. A man with a cigarette told my father he didn't believe a word of Arnie's story.

When the trial resumed, Dell took the stand in his own defense. He confirmed right off what everyone already knew, that he'd shot Howard Glover with a .38-caliber revolver. He also pointed out that he'd immediately turned himself in to the sheriff.

"What led up to the shooting?" said the defense lawyer, a trim-looking man from Dell's hometown in Kansas.

"We got into an argument about the price he'd offered me for the steers," said Dell. He sat back in the chair and spoke confidently. His black hair was neatly combed.

"Did you threaten Mr. Glover in any way?"

"No, I did not."

"Did *he* threaten you?" The lawyer bent forward.

"Yes, he did. He said he'd kill me before he'd pay me another dime." The room was extremely hot by now, but Dell looked cool in his light-grey suit.

"Then what happened?"

"He reached for his back pocket, and I knew he carried a gun there, so I pulled mine and shot first."

"And why did you have a gun with you?" The lawyer pushed his rimless glasses up on his nose.

"Force of habit. I always carry one back home because of the rattlesnakes." He gestured easily with his right hand.

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"So is it your testimony that you shot Howard Glover in self-defense?"

"Yes, it is. He said he'd kill me and I thought he meant it."

In his cross-examination, the county attorney concentrated on the guns. Dell insisted that he had not intended to shoot anyone the day he arrived at Glover's farm. He had his gun along, he repeated, only because of the snakes.

He did have to admit that he never actually saw Glover's gun, but he said everybody knew the old man usually carried one. Several people later testified for the defense that they'd often seen Glover with a pistol stuck in his back pocket.

During his final argument, the county attorney said that since Glover did not have his gun with him the day of the shooting it was clear that Dell had not acted in self-defense. "The two men quarreled over money," he said to the jury, "and Robert Dell shot Howard Glover out of anger, not fear. Therefore, you have no choice but to find him guilty of murder." He said it without much force. He looked like a man who needed a cool shower.

When his turn came, the defense lawyer argued that Dell had acted reasonably and legally in response to Glover's threats and movements, regardless of whether the old man had a gun with him or not. "Several witnesses have testified that he usually did carry one," he said, "and Mr. Dell had no reason to think otherwise on this occasion, especially after Mr. Glover had threatened to kill him."

Dell's lawyer ended his case by saying it was obvious that Arnie, the state's main witness, hadn't really seen the shooting at all. And as a matter of fact Arnie told me a few weeks later that he hadn't even gone near the pond that day.

When the jury brought in a verdict of Not Guilty, almost everyone in the room stood up and cheered. If Glover had a lot of mourners, they weren't around that day. My father smiled at me and put his hand on my shoulder. From all this, I concluded that the jury had made the right decision. Dad took me across the street to the Royal Cafe and we both had two pieces of apple pie.

As we walked out of the cafe a little later, we met Dell and his wife on the sidewalk and my dad introduced me to them. Dell shook my hand, and his pretty wife bent down and kissed me on the cheek. I felt awfully embarrassed. They left town that night and never came back.

I know now I should've told someone what I saw. I had a clear

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vantage point from my hiding place behind the pond bank and I still remember everything perfectly. Dell and Glover stood about ten feet apart on the other side of the pond—Dell tall and lean, Glover short and heavy, both men full of hate. High scattered clouds sailed east, dragging their shadows across the pond. Red-winged blackbirds fluttered about in the cattails. I don't know if Glover really saw me or if that's just something Maxwell made up.

Arnie's account of what happened came surprisingly close to the truth in spite of the fact that he wasn't actually there. Dell's exact words were, "Pay me what we agreed on or by God I'll shoot you right now."

"Then go ahead and shoot," said Glover, a breeze tousling his thin grey hair, "because I'm not paying you another dime." If he had a gun, he kept it out of sight. He never reached for his back pocket and he didn't make any threats. When Dell took out his revolver Glover just stared at him, like a man who'd rather die than lose a dollar.

The gun made a tremendous noise. I'd never heard anything louder than a .22-caliber rifle before that. Glover fell back on the yellow clay, his arms and legs sprawled out like a puppet's. The redwings flew away through the cottonwoods. Dell walked around the body toward his truck, and I ran like the devil for home.

As I said, I know now that I should've told someone, but I didn't know it then. I wasn't supposed to be there in the first place and I was afraid I'd get in trouble. Besides that, from what my father and everyone else said I wasn't sure Dell had done anything wrong. Adults forget that kids take them literally. I thought people would get mad at me if I told.

I guess it really doesn't matter any more. I don't know who I'd tell now, or who would care. Maxwell Glover died of a stroke a few years ago and his wife moved to Arizona. Arnie was killed earlier in Vietnam. Dell may still be alive, but who wants to bother an old man?

My father was right about one thing. No jury in Fox County was going to convict anyone for shooting Howard Glover. Dad always thought the old man got just what he deserved. They're both dead now, buried in the same graveyard. When we decorate my parents' graves every spring, I sometimes put a flower on Howard Glover's. My wife asked me why one time. I just told her I owed him something.

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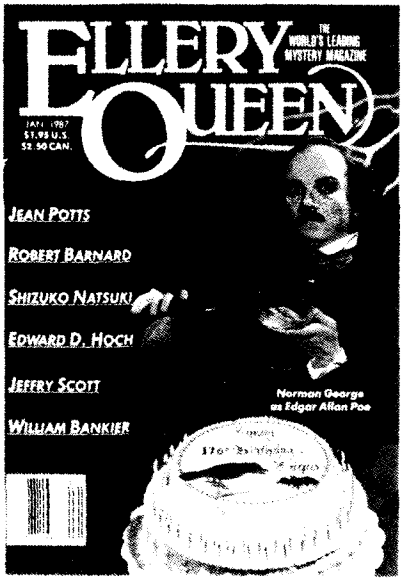

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a *NEW* short story by

DOROTHY SIMPSON

"Howard, you're not ill, are you?" his wife asked.

"No. No. It's just that every day I look at you and think that time is running out for us so fast that soon I'll be able to count the weeks, if not the days, that remain to us on the fingers of one hand. And when I see myself in the mirror like this and think how I must look to you—an old, old man." He shook his head sadly. "I find it hard to bear, that's all."

A nightmarish Roald Dahl-like story you're not likely to forget, from Dorothy Simpson, whose Last Seen Alive *won this year's Silver Dagger from the British Crime Writers Association and whose* Dead on Arrival *has just been published by Scribners . . .*

THE PERSON INSIDE

by DOROTHY SIMPSON

Even before he opened his eyes, he was aware of the excitement. He frowned, trying to pinpoint its source. Then he remembered: against all the odds, he had just pulled off the biggest gamble of his life.

After days of hovering just below the level of full consciousness, days punctuated only by the prick of a needle, by murmurs of reassurance, today he was fully alert, his brain as clear and sharp as it had ever been.

He could have laughed aloud for joy, but he checked himself. The door was opening, people were entering the room, and suddenly he wanted to hug this moment of triumph to himself for a little longer.

"Still dead to the world, by the look of it." The voice was young, light, feminine.

"Shut up, Mandy." Another youthful voice, full of amused re-

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proach. "Sister'll have your guts for garters if she hears you saying things like that."

Competent hands stripped the bed, rolling him this way and that, smoothing and patting the clean sheets into place.

"What's so special about this one, anyway? Dr. Whittington's been fussing around like a mother hen with one chick."

"Mandy! You know we're not supposed to discuss the coma patients in front of them."

"Don't be so bloody boring, Jilly. Sometimes you're so conformist you make me want to puke. I really would like to know what makes him so different from all the others. Why all the mystery?"

"Mandy!"

"Oh, come on, Jilly. Even you have to admit it's intriguing. All the high-powered attention he's been getting, the fact that no one knows anything about him, not even why and when he was admitted. D'you know he hasn't had a single visitor in the whole two weeks he's been here? *Smith*. Even his name's fishy, if you ask me."

"Shut up, Mandy. You just don't know how much he understands."

How right she was, thought Jackson. But he was pleased. Evidently his instructions had been followed to the letter. Mandy's next words brought him a different kind of satisfaction.

"Shame, isn't it? Good-looking fellow like that. I could've really fancied him myself."

On a further, scandalized "Mandy!" they left, and at last he was alone again.

Now.

Slowly, he stretched, savoring the long-forgotten, unfamiliar sensation of taut muscles, of energy rippling through firm flesh. He lifted his hands and ran them over the smooth skin, the abundant chest hair, the taut stomach, the lean, hard thighs. A vivid memory of Anna flashed into his mind.

She was sitting at her dressing table in a flowing negligee of apricot-colored satin, brushing her long, glossy black hair. She looked so beautiful that it was painful for him to watch her. He was standing behind her, his old man's hands resting lightly on her shoulders, his withered, liver-spotted flesh an insult to such radiance.

"What's the matter?" She had been watching his reflection in the mirror and now she twisted to look up at him in concern.

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is." She took one of his hands, kissed it, and laid it

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gently against the soft bloom of her cheek. "You know I can always tell."

He sank wearily down onto a nearby chair. "Just the same old thing. I'm much too old for you, Anna, and there's no point in pretending otherwise."

"Darling, how often do I have to tell you? Age simply doesn't matter between us. It's irrelevant, it's as simple as that."

He shook his head. "You know as well as I do that this is one problem that can only get worse as time goes on. I should never have married you, taken advantage of your youth and inexperience."

"But I wanted to be taken advantage of!" In a fluid movement which served only to point up the contrast between them and underline the truth of what he had been saying, she slipped off the stool and knelt at his feet. "I love you, Howard. I always have, right from the first moment we met."

He put out his hand to stroke her hair. "So you've always said. But the sad truth is that although the difference between twenty and sixty is bad enough, the difference between thirty-eight and seventy-eight is even worse. If I'd been twenty years younger, we'd have all that extra time ahead of us, but now—"

"Howard, you're not ill, are you? Something you haven't told me about?"

"No. No. At least, there's nothing specific. It's just that every day I look at you and think that time is running out for us so fast that soon I'll be able to count the weeks, if not the days, that remain to us on the fingers of one hand. And when I see myself in the mirror like this and think how I must look to you—an old, old man." He shook his head sadly. "I find it hard to bear, that's all."

She put up her face to kiss him. "You're *Howard*. That's all that matters to me. It's *you* I love, the real you, the person inside. Darling, let's enjoy what we have, not waste the time that remains to us sighing over what might have been."

Outside in the corridor a trolley went rattling by, recalling him to the present. Suddenly he couldn't wait to *see*.

He opened his eyes to white ceiling and pale-yellow walls striped with sunshine filtering through the venetian blinds. It seemed entirely appropriate that it was a beautiful day. He couldn't see what he was looking for, but the half open door to his private bathroom beckoned to him. He folded back the bedclothes and sat up—or tried to. Dizziness washed over him in waves and he fell back against the pillows, cursing. Excitement had made him forget. He was bound

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to be weak after such a major operation, followed by a fortnight in bed. But he wasn't deterred. The need to look, to *see,* was filling his mind to the exclusion of all else. Moving very slowly, very carefully, he tried again, easing himself up into a sitting position and then lowering his legs gently over the side of the bed, preparatory to attempting to stand up.

The door opened. "Mr. *Smith*!" Shock, horror. Jilly, by the voice. "What on earth do you think you're doing!"

She came across the room in a rush, and almost before he knew what was happening he was back in bed, leaning against his pillows, glaring up at her in frustration.

"I wanted to go to the bathroom." The voice shocked him. It was deeper than his old one, more resonant.

"And so you shall. Eventually. When you're strong enough." Thermometer in his mouth, firm fingers on his pulse. "But not yet, not until Dr. Whittington's had a look at you. He'll be along any minute now." She put her head on one side and gazed at him critically. "He'll be so pleased you've come round at last." She smiled. "And so am I. Welcome back."

"Thank you. But I really do feel fine. Couldn't I just—"

"I'm afraid not. Would you like a bedpan?"

"No, thanks. I—"

"Mr. Smith!" Whittington, beaming, triumphant, his surprise and delight reflected on the faces of his entourage. For a few minutes all was medical bustle and then, finally, the two men were alone.

"So," said Whittington, seating himself beside the bed. "We made it."

"Looks like it. I can hardly believe it."

"To be honest, neither can I. Do you realize we've made medical history?"

"I suppose I have. But frankly, that's not what matters to me. What matters to me is seeing what I look like."

Whittington smiled. "I can imagine. And believe it or not, I can gratify that wish right now." He rose, then paused, head on one side, to gaze critically at Howard's face. "I hope you're not expecting too much at this stage. No one looks his best with a turban of bandages. And it'll take a while for your hair to grow, of course. Meanwhile, I've managed to get hold of a wig which is an excellent match."

He hesitated a moment longer before stooping to take a hand mirror out of the bedside locker. "I knew this would be the first

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thing you'd ask for, so I put it in here immediately after the operation. As a gesture of faith that you'd be needing it."

Howard took the proffered mirror. The handle was cool to his touch and it took all the self-control he possessed not to raise it immediately. He laid it face down on the bed and said, "I think, if you don't mind—"

Whittington rose at once, but he was disappointed, Howard could tell. No doubt he wanted to watch this unique patient's reaction to the miracle he had performed. "Of course. I'll see that you're not disturbed for a while." And he left, closing the door gently behind him.

Howard looked at the mirror lying on the chaste hospital blanket. Such a small object, yet at this moment in his life possessing such potential power for joy or despair. Now that the moment was here at last, he found himself paralyzed by fear. What if he had done the wrong thing and it had all been a terrible mistake? He closed his eyes, playing back in his mind for the thousandth time the conversation that had started the whole thing off.

It had taken place only a few days after the incident he had just been recalling, on the occasion of his seventy-eighth birthday. In his opinion, celebration of such an event was at best inappropriate, at worst grotesque, but Anna had insisted. She loved to make much of the minor landmarks of life, and his unremitting desire to gratify her slightest whim had triumphed over his reluctance to make much of a day he would have preferred to pass unnoticed.

Anna was a dazzling hostess, and as usual the dinner party was a huge success. The atmosphere had been especially relaxed and congenial, for she had taken care to invite only people of whom he was particularly fond—old friends they had known for years. One of these was David Holmwood, a surgeon who specialized in heart and lung transplants, and an inquiry about the progress of David's most recent patient, a boy of six who had made the headlines in every national newspaper, had led to a general discussion of transplants, donors, and brain death.

It was Emily Buchanan, the wife of James Buchanan, a business colleague of Howard's, who had introduced a new dimension into the conversation.

"But surely," she'd said, eyes bulging earnestly, "there comes a point at which this sort of thing has to stop." She flushed as everyone turned to listen. "I mean, well, you can't just go on indefinitely, taking bits of people out and putting them into other people. Oth-

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erwise you could end up with someone who was not really either himself or the donor, but a sort of hybrid, not a *real* person at all."

A few moments of silence followed, then everyone started talking at once.

"Oh, nonsense, Emily—"

"But, Emily—"

"I see what you mean—"

"But that's ridiculous—"

"I don't agree—"

"You've got a point there—"

They looked at each other, laughed, politely fell silent, and glanced at Howard, their host, as if deferring to a referee.

He smiled and said, "Looks as though you put the cat among the pigeons, Emily. But surely it depends on what you mean by a real person."

Emily, clearly taken aback by the general response, shifted uncomfortably in her chair and said, somewhat defiantly, "It just seems to me that we all, as individuals, are a unique blend of mind and body, and if you destroy that blend by substituting too many bits of someone else's body, you're going to destroy the individuality."

"My word, Emily," said Holmwood, leaning back in his chair and sipping his wine, "you *are* carrying us into deep waters, aren't you?" He raised his glass and said dramatically, "Wherein lies the essence of a man's individuality? —Well, any takers?"

"In the body, surely," said Buchanan. "It is my body, my face, that make me recognizably me."

"I'm not so sure," said Howard.

"Oh, come, Howard," said Holmwood, "you're surely not saying you fell in love with Anna for her beautiful mind?" He glanced at Anna, radiant at the end of the table. "Because, if so, frankly, I shall think you either a liar or a man capable of monumental self-deception."

A ripple of laughter ran around the table and Anna smiled. "I'm not sure whether that remark should be taken as a compliment to my body or an insult to my mind."

"Oh, but the former, of course!" cried Holmwood. "I'm not saying that your mind is not just as beautiful as your body, it's just that I'm sure Howard fell in love with your appearance first, and your personality second."

"I think we're getting off the point," said Felicia, Holmwood's wife. "The question, as you so succinctly put it, darling, is, 'wherein lies

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the essence of a man's individuality?' And I think it lies in the mind. The thing that makes me Felicia, my personality, has nothing to do with my body. It originates in my brain, I'm certain of it. Put it this way, darling. If you had a dreadful accident—in a fire, perhaps, and were badly burned, and had to have extensive plastic surgery—I'd still love you afterward, because you'd still be you."

"Would you, darling?" said Holmwood, smiling. "I must say that's a very comforting thought."

"I agree," said Emily.

"And so do I," said Anna firmly.

Howard glanced at her. She was smiling at him down the length of the table and he knew they were both remembering that conversation in the bedroom. He smiled back, but in his heart he found that he couldn't agree with her. He couldn't imagine Anna as being Anna if she looked different. She wouldn't *be* Anna. Perhaps it was different for men.

"It must be true," said Felicia. "Otherwise, how would you account for those classic cases of handsome men or beautiful women who fall in love with people who are either nondescript or downright ugly. I'm sure we've all heard people say, 'I can't think what he—or she—sees in her, or in him. Isn't that so?"

"Well, yes."

"There you are, then," said Felicia triumphantly. "And what's more, I'm sure you've never heard the husband or wife of any of your patients complain that their partner is not really their partner any more, even though they are now dependent for their very existence on the heart and lungs—two of the most important organs in the body—of another person, have you?"

"Certainly not," said Holmwood. "Quite the opposite, in fact. It's sometimes quite difficult to cope with their degree of gratitude."

"Come off it, David," said Anna teasingly. "You love it—you know you do."

"And so should I," said Buchanan, "If I were in his position. It must give you a tremendous feeling of power."

"Instead of making all that disgusting money in the filthy business world, you mean," retorted Holmwood with a grin.

Buchanan laughed. "Precisely."

"Cheese, anybody?" said Anna.

And the subject was abandoned.

But not by Howard. For the remainder of the evening, snatches of this conversation kept floating through his mind and he became

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aware of a growing sensation of—what? He didn't know. He knew only that there was something trying to break through into his conscious mind, like water trying to find its way through a crack in the sea wall.

"Are you all right, darling?" murmured Anna at one point.

"Fine. Really," he said, meaning it. For whatever this feeling heralded, it was good, it was positive, he was sure of that.

It was later, much later, when they were at last in bed, that enlightenment came.

Anna snuggled up to him with a contented sigh and said, "It was a good evening, darling, wasn't it?"

"Lovely. Perfect. Thanks to you, of course." And he began to stroke her hair.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it." She yawned, then twisted to look up at him. "You're sure you're all right?"

"Absolutely fine." Which by now was true no longer. For the last hour or so, he had been feeling deathly tired, conscious of the weight of every second of his full seventy-eight years.

"Good," she said sleepily. "Good night, then."

"Good night, my love."

As he listened to her breathing slow and deepen, he thought bitterly that at one time an evening like this would have ended very differently. But lovemaking took so much energy, and although his spirit was always willing his flesh simply couldn't seem to match his emotional need. If only, he thought, he could slough off this old man's flesh like a snake shedding its skin and awake one morning with a new, younger body that could match Anna's in health and vigor—

He almost stopped breathing.

That was it.

Why shouldn't he?

Logically speaking, if it were now possible to transplant heart and lungs, it should soon be possible to transplant other organs. *Why not a brain transplant?*

His mind began to race. Anna had made it quite clear that as far as she was concerned it was his mind, his personality, which bound her to him. A man's body was merely a convenience, a necessary physical vehicle which housed his true self, and it was in the brain that that true self lay. A man could lose an arm or a leg, have organs riddled with disease in one form or another, but he would still be himself unless his brain were affected.

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The idea of a brain transplant was daring, revolutionary outside of fiction, but was there any reason why it shouldn't work, given sufficient patience, skill, and money? His brain was as clear and alert as ever, its powers undiminished, enhanced even, by the accumulated wisdom of years. If a donor could be found—a healthy male whose body was undamaged by whatever form of sudden death had overtaken him—what did he, Howard, have to lose? A few more years, perhaps, with a rapidly accelerating slide into debility and disease, years in which Anna would become little more than a nurse-companion. And just think of the possible gain! All his life, Howard had been prepared to take a calculated risk and he wasn't going to stop now, when he might have stumbled upon the secret of eternal life!

He lay awake most of the night, planning. The first step, of course, would be to contact David.

Holmwood didn't hesitate. "Whittington's your man. Manfred Whittington. Best brain surgeon in the world. You can recommend him to your friend without any reservations whatsoever. What exactly is the diagnosis? A brain tumor? Poor chap. Well, I'd say his chances with Whittington would be as high as he could hope to find anywhere."

Now came the difficult part—persuading Whittington to cooperate. Like a seasoned General preparing for the most crucial battle of his life, Howard tried to envisage every possible contingency. At last he was ready.

Whittington's initial reaction was predictable. "Mr. Jackson, you can't be serious!"

"I was never more serious in my life."

The surgeon leaned forward and, with a degree of compassion, said, "I understand your motivation, Mr. Jackson, and I sympathize with your inability to come to terms with the process of aging, but I'm afraid that you will have to accept that your suggestion is totally impracticable. Such an operation has never been attempted. You have no idea of its complexity, and I have to say straight out that in my opinion the chances of success are minimal, if not non-existent."

"But if I'm willing to take that risk?"

Whittington shook his head firmly. "I'm afraid I shouldn't be."

Howard had no intention of giving up yet. He leaned back in his chair and said casually, "Yes, I can understand your feelings. I

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suppose that even for the best brain surgeon in the world—which is how you were described to me—such an operation would present too many insuperable technical problems."

"I wouldn't necessarily say insuperable."

"Possibly surmountable, then?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. Never having considered such an operation, I have never attempted to plan how I should go about it."

There was an abstracted gleam in Whittington's eyes now. He was, Howard thought, becoming professionally intrigued by the problem.

"Naturally," said Howard, "I would expect such a sophisticated and difficult operation to command a very high fee. An astronomical fee, in fact."

All those business deals over the years had given him antennae hypersensitive to change of attitude. Whittington had given no outward sign, but Howard could tell that the surgeon's interest had quickened. "I might as well tell you," he went on, "that I had in mind the figure of one million pounds."

Whittington's mouth fell open. "One million—"

"One million pounds," said Howard, nodding. "No strings attached. The fee would be paid whether the operation was a success or not. I should be willing to sign a document stating that I would be undergoing the operation purely of my own free will, that the risks have been spelled out to me, and that I am prepared to take them. Should I die, no blame could attach to you. There would, however, be one condition."

"Oh?" said Whittington warily.

"Should the operation be a success, there would be no publicity."

"But—"

"I know what you are going to say, Dr. Whittington. You are going to say that should such an operation succeed you would have made medical history and naturally you would want to shout it from the rooftops. I can sympathize with those feelings, but for personal reasons I must insist that there would under no circumstances be any publicity whatsoever. I realize that this is a lot to ask of you, and this is partly why my fee is so generous."

Whittington stood up and walked across to stand looking out of the window, hands clasped behind his back.

This was the crucial moment, Howard thought. All his cards were down and Whittington's cupidity and desire to meet this exciting professional challenge would have to overcome the prospect of frus-

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trated vanity should the operation succeed. Nevertheless, Howard was optimistic. The chances of success were so remote that Whittington would think himself a fool to turn such a proposition down. What, after all, did he have to lose?

The surgeon swung around. "Very well," he said, "I'll do it." He returned to his chair and sat down.

"Good." Howard's smile betrayed none of the excitement that roared through him like a mighty wind. "When?"

Whittington shrugged, as cool as his patient. "I presume you would like it to be as soon as possible?"

"Naturally."

"In that case, I suggest we do the necessary tests on you today."

"Blood tests, tissue tests, that sort of thing?"

Whittington nodded. "Of course, the major stumbling block is going to be finding a suitable donor. You do realize that once it's all set up, the instant a donor becomes available we shall have to act immediately. You will have to make your arrangements and hold yourself ready at a moment's notice."

"I appreciate that."

Everything went smoothly. He updated his will, made a complete dossier of all the information Anna might need should the operation go wrong, and told her that sometime in the next few months he was expecting to pull off a crucial business deal, the biggest he had ever handled in his life, and when the time came to finalize it he would have to go away at a moment's notice for a period of three or four weeks. She was not to worry, he said, if she didn't hear from him during that time. He would be in touch with her as soon as possible. She didn't like it, but he managed to overcome her objections. He had in any case never involved her in his work and she was predisposed to accept whatever explanations he chose to give.

The call came three months later. The donor was a healthy male of forty-two who had died of brain damage after a traffic accident. He was a widower with no children and no relations who could later ask inconvenient questions, and had carried a donor card bequeathing his entire body to medical research in the event of his sudden death.

"Perfect!" said Howard. "I'm on my way."

And here he was, two weeks later, sitting up in bed with the mirror now warm in his hand.

Eyes closed, he slowly raised it, took a deep breath, looked.

The glass was misted up from the moist heat of his palm and

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impatiently he grabbed a handful of sheet and polished the glossy surface before looking again.

And experienced pure panic.

He had imagined this moment a thousand times, and intellectually he knew that he would be looking at the face of a stranger, but nothing had prepared him for the sheer emotional impact of looking in a mirror and seeing someone else. It was as if, in that split second, his identity had been stripped away, never to be restored to him. His heart pounded in his chest, thundered in his ears, and he closed his eyes. Easy, he told himself. To have a heart attack now would be ironic beyond belief. You're still Howard, you know you are. All your memories, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes are the same. You only look different. His heartbeat steadied and he took several deep, calming breaths before opening his eyes again.

This time he was able to look at his new image critically. He liked what he saw. It was a good face, strong yet kind, with calm grey eyes, prominent nose, and well formed mouth. He turned the mirror this way and that, familiarizing himself with these new contours. And, yes, he thought it was a face that would appeal to women—to Anna, specifically, for she was the only woman who would ever interest him.

He could now proceed with the next part of his plan.

He glanced at his watch. Six P.M. Yes, she should be at home. He reached for the phone, dialed, conscious of his quickened heartbeat. His hunger for her voice was intense.

"Hullo?"

"Anna?"

"Who is this?"

Damn. I forgot the voice was different. He held the phone away from him before speaking again. "It's me, Howard, darling. Can you hear me? It's a very bad line."

"Howard? I didn't recognize you. First you were very loud, now you're very faint. Where are you?"

"Look, darling, I've only got a few minutes. Just to say I hope to be home in time for dinner on the twentieth."

"But that's another two weeks!"

"I know. I'm sorry, darling, it's all taking longer than I thought. I can't wait to see you again. I love you."

"I love you, too, darling."

"I know it's frightening, but—" Gently he replaced the receiver, deliberately cutting himself off in midsentence . . .

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The two weeks passed more quickly than he had hoped. He had to get his strength back, gradually build up his exercise program. There were tests to do, plans to implement. He had already decided that Howard Jackson must die. He couldn't expect colleagues, casual acquaintances, business connections to accept him as Jackson. No, Howard would die in a helicopter crash while crossing the mountains.

The pilot, a man with reason to be deeply grateful to Howard, had already agreed to his part in the charade. He would be paid enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life and would, Howard was sure, keep his mouth shut afterward, even under pressure. Then, after a decent period of mourning, Howard and Anna would marry again and would take up their relationship where it had left off—with the difference that now they would be perfectly matched in health and vigor. The temporary separation would, of course, be torment, but with many years of happiness ahead of them, it would be a small price to pay.

Howard awaited the twentieth in a fever of anticipation, and at 5:00 P.M. was knocking at his own front door. By now, he calculated, Anna should be home.

The door was opened, as he knew it would be, by Sutton, their butler for many years.

"I have a message for Mrs. Jackson from her husband," said Howard. "He specifically requests that she read his letter before seeing me. Here is my card."

He had chosen the name Harold James, a pleasant, unexceptionable name with the merit of having the same initials as his own.

Sutton bowed. "Certainly, Mr. James. Would you step this way, sir?"

The letter had been a crucial part of Howard's plan. He knew that he couldn't risk just turning up and allowing Anna to learn what he had done face to face. The shock would be too great. No, she must be told in advance, but not sufficiently far in advance to allow her imagination to run wild. He, Howard, must be at hand to reassure her, to allay her fears, and to answer the many questions she would inevitably need to ask.

Howard had thought long and hard about that letter, had written and rewritten it many, many times. In it he had explained exactly what he had done, and why, and outlined his plans for the future. He now awaited Anna's reaction in a state of anxiety the like of

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which he had never experienced in all his seventy-eight—no, he must remember now, *forty-two*—years.

Thirty interminable minutes elapsed before Sutton reappeared.

"Mrs. Jackson will see you now, sir."

Had Howard imagined the sharp look Sutton had given him?

He followed the butler up the familiar stairs into the first-floor drawing room.

And there she was at last. Howard hungrily took in every detail of her beloved appearance as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

She was standing near the window, his letter in her hand, looking—understandably—shaken.

He waited for her to speak.

She advanced toward him. "I don't know who you are or what kind of preposterous game you're playing, Mr. James, but I have decided to give you an opportunity to explain yourself before I call the police."

"Anna—"

"How dare you use my Christian name! I told you, I don't believe a word of this—this, *rubbish*. Where is my husband? What have you done with him?"

"Please, An— Please. I assure you every word in that letter is true. I *am* Howard. I *am* your husband."

She stared at him, her lips tightening. Then she swung around and reached for the telephone. "I see I have no alternative."

"No!" In two steps he was beside her, his hand closing over her wrist. "You'll ruin everything!"

"I'm sure I shall!" Her eyes blazed with anger and determination. "Let go of me! Let *go!*"

"But, Anna—"

"Don't call me that!" she shrieked. She tore her hand away from his grasp and stood rubbing her wrist. "You must think me a complete fool to expect me to be taken in by this. How did you get my husband to write this crazy letter? What have you done to him? I suppose it's money you're after!"

"No!" shouted Howard. Of all the reactions he had expected, disbelief was the one that had never entered into his calculations and he felt at a complete loss. "No, I don't want money, not a single penny, do you hear?"

Anna's eyes narrowed. "Then *what?*" she said.

Howard shook his head helplessly. "I just wanted you—wanted to have more time with you."

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"You're mad," said Anna, and there was fear in her eyes now. "And I'm sorry, but I'm not listening to this nonsense any longer." She began to edge toward the bell which would summon Sutton.

Howard glanced at the clock. A few moments to six. "Look," he said. "I don't want to frighten you, or hurt you. Please, just give me a minute or two. The news will be coming on."

"The news? What's that got to do with it?"

"I told you in the letter. I arranged for my death to be faked."

Anna stared at him for a moment and then, in a rush, crossed to the television set and switched it on.

"News headlines. The Prime Minister has announced new measures to combat unemployment. . . . Howard Jackson, the financier, is dead. His helicopter exploded after crashing in the Cairngorms this afternoon. . . . And there is new hope for cancer sufferers. . . .

"You've killed him!" cried Anna. "So that's it! You've killed him and now you want to step into his place, take over his business, his fortune—me!" Suddenly, she came at him, fists flailing. "Murderer!" she screamed. "Murderer!"

Howard tried to put up his hands to grasp her wrists, fend her off, but his arms wouldn't obey him. He was conscious of a sensation of weakness flooding through his limbs, of blurred vision and fading light.

As the hemorrhage in the tired arteries of his brain flowered and spread, his last emotion was one of chagrin, that death had managed to defeat him after all.

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Three hours after the paper with the ad offering $500.00 for the Missus' lost poodle hit the stands, a man showed up at the door, his jeans missing a couple of pieces, a bandage on one ear, and Princess under his arm. He was on his way as soon as the ink on the check was dry . . .

THE DOG THIEF

by HELENE MELYAN

My first dog, Sam, was a golden retriever. Then there was Moose, then Bonnie, then a stray called Dog. I loved them all. People never impressed me very much. The situation was mutual, me being about as handsome as Dog the day I found him at the pound and two-thirds as tall as Moose when he stood on his hind legs. I never worried about it much. I've always had my health, and my dogs, and a series of odd but interesting jobs. Then, when I was in San Bernardino between dogs and jobs, I met the Missus.

The Missus—that's what I always called her—was what a less perceptive man would have called a foolish and rich old woman. To me she was a great lady. When I answered her ad for a live-in handyman-bodyguard-gardener, I expected the usual startled gaze that would slowly turn to polite distress. Instead, she looked me over and said, "Young man, you're very short. Can you drive?"

I explained that I knew I was short and that vehicles can be adapted.

"Well, then, there's only one problem." Sure, I thought, the job had already been filled, but she might call if it didn't work out and she wished me luck. "You have to be able to get along with my baby," she said. Then she did something that endeared me to her for all time. She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled like a twelve-year-old.

A small white poodle darted into the room and buried its teeth into my trousers. "If you can put up with Princess, you've got the job," she told me.

I never met a dog that didn't like me. In two weeks, Princess was

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greeting me with wild affection and sleeping at the foot of my bed. And I liked her, too, even if she was spoiled and ten pounds overweight—something I soon remedied with diet and exercise. The Missus treated me like a nephew, and life seemed pretty good.

Then disaster struck. One morning I came home from an errand and found the Missus surrounded by wet Kleenex. Princess was gone.

"She was whimpering to go outside and I was still in my nightgown, so I let her out alone. The gate was closed, and she never leaves the yard. But when I got dressed and went out for her, she was gone." She dissolved anew, and I put my arms around her and promised it would be all right.

We put signs all over and an ad in the paper offering a $500 reward. Three hours after the paper hit the stands, a man showed up at the door, his jeans missing a couple of pieces, a bandage on one ear, and Princess under his arm. He was on his way as soon as the ink on the check was dry.

A couple of weeks later, while the Missus and I were at the doctor's, we left Princess locked in the Rolls in the parking lot, with the window open a crack for air. When we returned, Princess was gone, and the window was half open. This time it was clearly not an escape. Princess was smart, but she didn't know how to jimmy a car window.

"Why didn't they take the car and leave Princess?" the Missus sobbed.

It didn't take me long to figure out why. It's not easy to hide a Rolls. It's a lot easier to hide a rich old lady's dog, wait for the reward to be offered, then show up with the dog, and go home several hundred dollars richer for having done a good deed.

If my intuition was right, we had been taken in again, probably by the same creep. The only problem was, he had unwittingly stolen the same dog twice. I wasn't surprised when the Missus' ad ran several days this time with no response. The guy wasn't a complete fool. As soon as he realized what he had done, he'd probably dumped Princess—or worse. I didn't voice this to the Missus, but I knew he wasn't going to show up on her doorstep again, just happening to have found Princess a second time.

I thought I was feeling about as bad as I could feel, going out to look for Princess every day, then coming home to watch that sweet lady crying her heart out, but I was wrong. I felt as if a part of me

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had died when I went to wake the Missus late one morning a week after Princess disappeared and she was cold.

Nobody came to the funeral except me and the lawyers. They wanted to talk to me afterward, but I told them some other time, I had something I had to do.

I had to find a mangy thief who probably had a bandage on some part of his anatomy, and a pedigreed pooch or two locked in his basement or garage pending offer of reward.

It was almost too easy. A search of the Missus' desk drawers turned up a canceled check for $500.00 to one Fred Friedlander, who, in addition to being a rat, was pretty dumb. He was listed in the phonebook.

I guess he never worried about being looked up. People gave him money, called him a hero, and said goodbye. Nobody had had reason to come looking for him before.

And nobody, judging from the look on his face, had ever shown up at his door with a gun before.

He tried to be cool, but the sweat sprouting on his forehead gave it away. (And he *was* wearing a bandage!)

"Hey, shorty," he bluffed, "put that thing away. You might hurt somebody."

"I know." I smiled. A chorus of barking and whining from the garage told me my intuition was doing me proud. I cocked the gun.

"Please," Fred whimpered, sounding worse than the dogs. "I'll do anything. Just tell me what you want. Is it money?"

"A small white poodle," I said. "You stole her from a Rolls in the Medical Center parking lot last week. And don't bother lying, because that makes me nervous. And when I get nervous"—I grinned up at him—"my hands aren't so steady."

"I swear I don't have her—not any more. I did take her, you're right. When I saw the car, I figured there'd be a nice reward. But as soon as I got her home I realized it was the same mutt, and I knew I couldn't pull it off a second time."

"What do you do to get them to go with you?"

"Just a little chloroform. Not much. It doesn't hurt them."

"So what did you do with her?"

"Nothing, I swear. I just drove across town and let her out of the car. It's what I do with dogs when nobody offers a reward. I just let them out somewhere and hope they'll find their way home. And some of them *do,* honest!"

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It's against my ethics to shoot anybody, and besides, shooting didn't seem appropriate. Prompted by my gun, he took me on a tour of his place—and was persuaded to demonstrate the effects of inhaling chloroform on the average-sized male.

Soon he was out cold, cold enough so I could tie him up and secure him in the trunk of the Rolls.

After a long drive, I dragged him out of the trunk and loosened the ropes. I estimated he'd be awake and free when I was about fifty miles gone.

When I got back to town, I liberated an Afghan, two Yorkies, and a whippet from Fred Friedlander's garage and reunited them with their owners. I wouldn't accept the rewards. It took a long time and I was tired, but I was ready to talk to the lawyers in the morning. It seemed the Missus had left me the house, the Rolls, and half a million dollars. The rest of her estate went to the ASPCA.

It turned out she left me something else. Two days later, bedraggled and somewhat mellowed, Princess found her way home. I gave her a bath, a good meal, and kissed the top of her curly little head.

It's funny, sometimes I'm sitting here in the big house with Princess in my lap and I get this feeling that the Missus is pleased with the way I handled things. I feel good just thinking about that—and I start remembering her and Sam and Moose and the others and I know I'm a lucky man.

As for Friedlander, he hasn't found his way home yet—at least not that I've heard. I'd bet that the odds of a small, pampered, thirteen-year-old poodle finding her way home across town are about equal to those of him finding his way back from the middle of Death Valley.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Heller posed in the sitter's chair, regaling Mitzi with stories of wild women he had known. Finally she stopped and got him a drink. She fixed herself one, too, knowing she would need it. The talk continued as the night settled in.

"You ready to eat, baby?" he suggested later.

"Not yet."

She left the room and came back with an automatic pistol, a heavy weapon that almost exceeded her grasp. She held it two-handed. "Remember this . . .?"

LEGACY FROM A BAD ACTOR

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"Mother, you picked a fine time to die," Mitzi Heller said quietly. Len was at her side. Her father was standing by himself at a measured distance from the open grave as if he suspected something might be waiting to push him in.

Len leaned close and whispered, "What?"

"I said you'd better drive."

They wanted to get her in a limousine but Mitzi wasn't having any. She drove her own car with Len beside her, arriving at the cemetery ten minutes before the cortege. "I have this dream," she had said to him on the way, "in which half a dozen hearses, big powerful jobs, engage in a sort of stock-car race. Hearses are always driven under wraps. Wouldn't it be incredible to see them bowling around a dirt-track flat out?"

"Like the chuckwagon race at the Calgary Stampede." Len La-

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mont was a Canadian, resident in California now for three years. He never let anyone lose sight of his origins.

When they were pulled up on a gravel yard, out of the car, and walking awkwardly over grass, Mitzi said, "God, I miss her."

"So do I. Tash liked me." Len went on to say, "Unlike Gary, who hates my guts."

Mitzi knew Len did not have it quite right. True, her father would have welcomed a thirty-second opening of the San Andreas Fault if it meant Len Lamont would be swallowed up and never seen again. Where Len erred was in believing he was liked by Natasha Prince Heller. Tash tolerated him mainly because he was good-looking and had charm. At 74, the old lady had been able, almost to the end, to enjoy the charge she experienced in the presence of el primo male material. But she also believed Lamont was a probable loser, one more actor/writer in a town that had far too many. And he had no money. And he was a sickie with his perpetual bronchial cough. And he might just have a roving eye.

"Don't make me laugh," Mitzi had responded to this last supposition when her mother, months ago, had been assessing the Canadian. "You've been married to Gary Heller for thirty years and he's slept with everything that moves."

"That's his way. I knew it when I married him. But you're not me," Tash said across her typewriter. At the time, her mother was demeaning herself, Mitzi thought, by writing an episode for a police series on television. How could a woman whose screen credits included the immortal *Take the Cash* so prostitute her talent? But Tash said she liked seeing her name on the small screen, which was true. She also said she needed the money, which was a joke—she had enough to last had she lived to be a hundred.

But then, damn it all to hell, she got some weird lung infection and died within days. Natasha Prince Heller went into hospital and expired, racing out of life like somebody catching a train, leaving her loved ones in the station with the important things left unsaid.

As the black limos moved in through the iron gateway and crept menacingly toward the hole in the ground where Mitzi and Len were waiting beside a pile of earth under its cover of artificial grass, Mitzi said, "She was on our side. You're right, Dad wants you gone. It's going to be interesting now to see what happens."

Gary Heller ended up in control of the house in Beverly Hills, all

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the cars, the bonds, the gold, the industrials, and the packets of cash in three safety-deposit boxes. That was what happened.

There had been no time to talk. Given a terminal illness with a reasonable lead-time, Tash and Mitzi would have held conversations during which the subject of her financial stability would have been discussed. And since Mom had been socking cash to her a couple of grand at a time down through the years, she would have made some arrangement now—especially since Mitzi was set on marrying Len. And especially especially since Mitzi was pregnant and not about to have another abortion, not this time. And especially especially especially since Gary Heller would, given the power, veto such a marriage, baby or not.

And now the power was his.

Mitzi invited her father to come up to the studio for lunch. She removed the large panorama from her easel—a detailed view of L.A. seen from the Griffith Observatory—and replaced it with her half completed portrait of Gary Heller. Len was having a coughing fit in the bathroom. She had stopped running and asking if he was okay, did he need help. He would only say, "It's the old brownchitis, as Mother used to call it. Chronic. I've learned how to live with it."

But he could not work with it. Many of the actors at liberty in L.A. earned good money as waiters. Len's cough was not welcome where food was being served. Laboring was out for the same reason. He had no office skills. Cash from Tash had made their affair viable. It would have got their marriage off the ground.

"I hate sending you out into that smog," Mitzi said as Len let himself out of the bathroom and came to her. He was looking splendid in his tailored jeans and skin-tight white T-shirt. When he grinned, it was an explosion of teeth and eyes. She wanted to be able to capture it someday in oils. He embraced her now and all the anxiety poured out of her. Here was what it was all about. This was what she was not giving up. She and Len together were a right thing. The baby was going to come in eight months, a healthy and beautiful baby. And the three of them were going to live happily ever after. "Drive up into the hills," she said, "where the air is better."

"I'll be okay," he said. "Will *you* be okay?"

"He's only my father," Mitzi said. "He can't kill me."

Gary Heller prowled his daughter's studio apartment, keeping on his snap-brim fedora like the seedy character he played so often in

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films. His movie career spanned three decades and had been consistent if not spectacular. He was still called on occasionally to play an aging, second-rank heavy, but Heller would never achieve stardom. Apart from wounded pride, which he masked with a layer of belligerence, the actor was not suffering. Tash's ability to earn large fees for her writing and her head for wise investments had kept the Hellers living on easy street. Unlike Mitzi, who chose to reside in this third-floor walkup in Venice, within sight of the beach and the spectacular weirdos on their roller-skates, not to mention the muggers who came out onto the dimly lit streets at night like hungry panthers.

"Why do you live in this scuzzy neighborhood?" Heller asked, not for the first time. He circled the small round table Mitzi had set for lunch, sweetly laid out with checkered cloth, a candle in a bottle, rolled napkins, gleaming silver, crystal goblets, and a liter of white wine in a silver bucket of ice.

"Sit, Father. The veal gets ready fast." Mitzi had learned from Tash to buy veal pounded wafer thin and to do it over intense heat, thirty seconds a side, in butter and lemon juice and wine.

Heller refused to sit when invited. The sniper might have that chair in his cross-hairs. He took another turn around the room, imagining cameras filming his performance. They were recording his dialogue, too, so Gary Heller could never say anything except for maximum dramatic effect.

"Where's Montreal's answer to *La Traviata?*" he asked.

"It isn't tuberculosis, it's only bronchitis."

"Too bad."

"He's out for a walk."

"Get him a sandwich-board, he might earn a few dollars."

Had her mother still been alive and ready to back Mitzi's marriage with money, Mitzi might have said something like, "You should talk, living most of your life on Tash's earnings. What you make yourself you spend on whores." Instead, she said, "Don't be cruel. And now you *must* come to the table. Help yourself to salad."

Heller threw his leg over the back of the cane-back chair and sank gracefully to a sitting position—a movement that had been getting laughs since high school. Now in his mid-seventies, he was lean and supple due to daily jogging, swimming, and frequent manipulation at the hands of a tiny Vietnamese masseuse.

He accepted a plate of food, tasted the meat, made a neat circle of thumb and finger, and used it to blow a kiss. "Magnifico!" Ten

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minutes later, finished eating, he lit a foul cigar while Mitzi dallied over her wine and a buttered roll.

"If you marry that no-talent hick, you'd better start selling everything you paint."

"What?"

"You'll have to support him. I won't."

"Tash would have wanted me to have money."

"Go ask her."

"You're a solid-gold bastard, Father."

"When I die, you can melt me down."

Mitzi got up and started clearing away. "Maybe even before."

Len returned minutes after Heller left. He had been waiting across the street. "How did it go?" His breathing was ropy from the three-flight climb.

"As I feared. He intends to give us the square root of zilch."

"I think it's better if we make it on our own."

"You think that's better, do you, Len?"

"When you accept anything from anybody, there is always a degree of control they try to exert."

"Maybe so. But there's all kinds of money there and Tash would have handed it over. You're pale as hell, are you all right?"

"I feel fine. Give me a minute."

"Sit by the window. I want to get you out of L.A. Into cleaner air. Our honeymoon is going to be someplace like Palm Springs."

Len drew her onto his knee and circled her waist with both of his arms. She lowered her head onto his shoulder and they breathed in unison for a couple of minutes. "You're right about control," she said. "If I were living alone and needed money, it would feed his ego no end to swagger in here and hit me with hundred-dollar bills."

"Are you telling me to get lost?"

"Shut up. Father has been like this about all the men in my life."

"Platoons of them. Battalions."

"I'll fix you later for that. He just wants to keep me as his little girl. One of his possessions."

"Was he a good father?"

"He was vile. They both were. Tash and Gary were totally focused on their own lives. Working, partying. I never had a proper childhood. I was shipped away to various schools where, I admit it, I was always a problem. I was even in Paris for a year when I was nine

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and father was doing a film. Stress all the time. I suppose I was a difficult child. Well, look who I had for parents."

Len kissed her—one of the mysterioso ones where they both kept their eyes open, staring into each other's soul. It lasted nearly a minute and then he said, "I'm going to suggest something. Don't go mad. We can talk."

"About what?"

"Suppose we just went on living together—"

She cut him off. "You must be joking. I don't intend to give birth to an illegitimate child."

"Mitzi, love, believe me, I'm as excited about the baby as you are. But given the difficulties we're facing right now, couldn't you do what you did before?"

"Len—" She said his name with a rising inflection that put the fear into him.

"We're only discussing."

"Last time was an accident. That sonofabitch musician, Keelhof. I was glad when he left town and, God forgive me, I felt purged after the abortion. Clean."

"This is nothing like that."

"Nothing. This is going to be you and me married. Forever. With a beautiful child, the three of us around the table, talking, having fun. This is going to be the childhood I never had. Got it?"

"Got it."

Mitzi rose to put the kettle on, pausing on the way to turn her father's unfinished portrait and look at it thoughtfully. "Now," she said, "I've got to think of some way for *him* to get it."

She made the effort and sold five of her paintings, a series of abstract designs. It wasn't easy for Mitzie Heller to ask people to pay her for her work. She thought it wasn't good enough. But she had motivation now. She took the money and ran to a travel agent, where she bought an airplane ticket to Montreal and back.

Len studied the dates on the ticket. His initial reaction was not exactly disappointment. "This is for next week," he said, getting his grin under control.

"You've got to get out of this heat and into cleaner air." August was roasting Angelinos in 105 degrees. The Hollywood Hills could be seen only dimly through a sepia blanket of smog.

"What about you?"

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"I'll work, I'll rest. I'll be okay. I was born here—I've got Teflon lungs."

Not wasting an hour, Mitzi drove from seeing Len off at the airport directly to the big house in Beverly Hills. She loved this street. Sometimes she drove down it just to absorb the atmosphere even when she couldn't stop and enter the house for fear of the poison inside. It was evening, the sky was pale, the palm trees were too spectacular to be real—twin lines of giant sentinels from a De Mille epic guarding the glorious homes, each one an architect's cadenza.

She parked, used her key to go inside, wandered through air-conditioned rooms where ornate furnishings failed to register because she had spent so little happy time here. There was a black-and-white film playing on the television in the library. Mitzi walked into the barroom atmosphere of bourbon and rough cigar smoke. It was a video of one of Gary Heller's old films. Her father was lost in it, he didn't see her come into the room. She lowered herself onto a chair and watched him as he watched himself. He was dark and dessicated, like something unwrapped in a tomb. Only his eyes moved as he followed the images on the screen. Mitzi glanced at the action and saw Gary Heller thirty years younger, not quite as lean then and bursting with energy as he threatened one of that era's favorite leading men.

The tape ran out, and as the screen went gray Heller closed his eyes. Then he reached for his glass of whiskey, and as he took a drink he saw his daughter. "Hey, Mitz. How'd you like the way I stole that picture?"

"They don't make 'em like that any more."

The actor performed an elaborate glance over both shoulders. "Where's the King of the Cough?"

"On a plane. Gone."

"You mean he took off?"

"Back to Montreal. He said he can't breathe here." Mitzi was a pretty good actor herself. It's easy to lie, she had discovered. All you do is tell the truth.

"Now we're in business. This is what I wanted. You and me, kid."

"Just the two of us now, Father."

"To the end?"

"To the very end."

He invited her to dinner at Sarno's but she was not about to move outside her game plan. She pleaded a prior engagement with an

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interested art buyer. Then she came up with her own invitation. "I'm itching to finish your portrait."

He agreed on an afternoon later in the week. "This is beautiful," he said. "All we had to do was lose that lame duck."

Mitzi said, "I'm excited, too. This is going to be the best thing I've ever done."

On the day of the sitting, Mitzi spent the morning on the beach. Len had telephoned early from Montreal. He was okay, the air was better, he was hardly coughing at all. But he missed her like mad and could he please come back? For a moment on the phone, she was tempted to tell him what was happening but she put it aside. Even one other person knowing what she was doing would increase the risk of getting caught.

"Darling, you relax up there. Take a good holiday. When you come back, we'll get married."

"How are you and the baby?"

"No problem."

The day was cloudy and not quite as blazing hot. The light was poor for painting. She hoped Gary wouldn't notice this up in Beverly Hills and decide to cancel. For what she had in mind, the less light the better.

One giant wave after another rolled in and broke over the sand. Young men on surfboards waited their chance, scrambled upright when the moment came, and rode a short distance only to go tumbling. Nobody looked anything like the people she saw in films who came streaming on the crest of a twelve-footer as if they were riding an escalator. The guys in the movies were the elite—today she was watching the average man. For that matter, she had listened to a lot of piano players in bars and had yet to hear Erroll Garner. Maybe her painting was as good as it would ever get.

As it turned out, Heller was three hours late for the appointment. He showed up at half past five, freshly showered and with a triumphant twelve-year-old grin on his septaugenarian face. "How was she, Father?" Mitzi asked, fighting back an urge to bring a bookend against the side of his head.

"You're not getting older, baby," he chanted, mimicking a cigarette commercial as he did a George Raft pirouette in his shiny little shoes, "you're getting better!"

She pretended to paint for a while in the fading light. He didn't know the difference. He posed in the sitter's chair, regaling her with

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stories of wild women he had known. Finally she stopped and got him a drink. She fixed herself one, too, knowing she would need it. The talk continued as the night settled in.

"You ready to eat, baby?" he suggested later.

"Not yet."

She left the room and came back with an automatic pistol, a heavy weapon that almost exceeded her grasp. She held it two-handed. "Remember this?"

"That's the gun I got you when the Beach Rapist was operating. I didn't know you kept it."

"I kept it."

"What are you doing with it?"

"Getting ready to blow your head off."

He laughed and lapsed into a whiny voice that was partly himself and partly Edward G. "Is this the end for Heller?"

"You better believe it."

Her determination was beginning to get to him. "What's with you, Mitzi? Don't drink any more."

"I've had enough. Enough of you. Tash died too fast. She never intended you to control all the money."

"Is this about money? What do you need? I'll write you a check."

"Len hasn't gone for good, Father. He loves me. I was talking to him today on the phone. As soon as you're dead, he'll come back. The estate will come to me. We'll get married and have my baby and everything is going to be just fine."

"Baby? Why didn't you say so?" Heller was beginning to sweat. At last he was hearing his daughter loud and clear. "I always wanted to be a grandfather. Len isn't such a bad guy. We'll adjust. Live and let live."

"You must think I'm slow. If I let you go now, you'll swear out a warrant against me. This is happening."

"You'll never get away with it. You'll have your baby in jail."

She had not considered that. Her heart turned over. Then she moved past the fear; she was not going to get caught. She told him about it.

"Simple plans work, Father. This one is very simple. This is my scuzzy neighborhood, remember. A lot of muggings take place here. We're going for a walk. I know a nice dark street. It's on the way to a bar where the girls hang out, the sort of place you like to visit. For the first time, I like your reputation. You're going to get robbed.

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And the perpetrator is going to have to shoot you because you don't give away your money without a fight."

"Mitzie—"

"Get up. I want this over with."

"We'll see a lawyer. Your lawyer. We'll give you twenty percent."

"Move, Father. Get your jacket."

"I'll sign something now."

"Down the stairs. The gun is in my shoulder bag and it's pointing at your back."

The best plans are simple. But none is insured against the unexpected. Mitzi conducted her father along empty streets toward the one she had in mind. The bar was three blocks away. They could hear breakers rolling in on the beach. He had stopped pleading. She believed he was looking for an opportunity to jump her, so she backed off, leaving a couple of strides between them.

That was when the young man moved out of a doorway showing the knife in his hand. "Give us what you got."

"Hey," was all Heller got to say.

"I need it, man." The knife was angled threateningly.

As the thief came at him, Heller moved swiftly to grab his wrist. It was like choreography and Mitzi felt a thrill of admiration. But the contest was ridiculous. The boy was twice her father's size and one-third his age. For a few seconds, shoes scraped on pavement, the two of them grunting with the effort. Mitzi was groping for the gun inside her bag. Then the realization hit her; this was what she wanted. If her father kept up the fight (and he would never let go of money easily) this thug would kill him. The scenario she had planned to bamboozle the police was becoming a true event. All she had to do was wait. And watch.

The sight of her father fighting for his life dismayed her, then it filled her with rage. She discovered something inside her far stronger than any practical desire to be rid of the lecherous old dictator. There was no need for thought, no time for it. The gun came out of the bag, and as she leveled it on the attacker she called, "Hey, you!"

He saw the gun. He was not deterred. He fought harder and Mitzi was able to read his mind. He was going to drive that knife into the old man and then he was going to come after the girl. This silly girl with the great big gun she could hardly hold in two wavering hands.

Mitzi surprised herself with the matter-of-fact way she did it. Changing position on the pavement to improve the angle, moving

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a step closer, she squeezed the trigger. The noise of the shot startled her, but not as much as the bullet shocked the young man. It hit him in the chest and knocked him against a brick wall, where he slid down slowly to a sitting position. He remained staring to the front for a moment. Then, like somebody dozing off, he closed his eyes and let his head sag onto his shoulder.

Heller was as delighted, as exhilarated as if he was acknowledging a standing ovation. "You sweetheart! Look what you did! Mitzi, you're incredible, you blew the bastard away!"

She said nothing, feeling faint now but bothered most of all by the realization of how much she was enjoying her father's praise.

"Give me the gun, sweetie. Give it here, the cops are going to be with us any minute." He took the knife from the pavement where the mugger had dropped it and tucked it blade-first inside the young man's belt. Then he knelt, drew back his fist, and struck him on the jaw. The blow hurt his fist, which was what he wanted. "The gun?" he said, wringing his bruised hand. "Please?"

A police siren sounded, coming closer. This plot was over, probably forever. She couldn't engineer a fake mugging now that there had been a real one. Mitzi gave him the gun as flashing lights appeared at the end of the street.

The police recognized Heller from a dozen late late movies. They enjoyed his story, which he told like the scrappy little guy they knew him to be. "He was holding this gun on me. Here, you better take it. My daughter distracted him—she's the brave one. When he looked at her, I got in a punch. It was on the button, but it ain't like the movies. He didn't fall." They laughed at that.

"But he dropped the gun when he staggered and I grappled with him. See the knife in his belt? He was going for that, so I tried to pin his arms. Go ahead, it's funny. I was good for about ten more seconds. Then I heard this shot and the guy is down. My daughter picked up the gun and let him have it. She saved her daddy's life."

The life growing inside her, as the weeks went by, was all Mitzi cared about. Even Len Lamont himself seemed less important, although she wanted him to marry her one of these months to give the baby a proper name. But her focus was totally on the child. Len's telephone calls continued—they tried to keep them short, afraid to face a huge bill from AT&T—He was doing okay.

Then he was doing better than okay. Without any great hopes, he attended a casting session and landed a substantial part in a motion

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picture being made in Montreal's old town. Filming was to last for two months, so there was no way he would be back before the autumn. Maybe her father would be in line by that time.

"I doubt it." She had told Len about the shooting but had not explained the truth—that it was her gun and she had been on her way to murder the old man. "Listen, I need a vacation myself. Maybe I'll get some money together and fly up there and see you."

He seemed happy at the idea, but not overwhelmed with delight. "The thing for you to do is take care of yourself and the baby. Only travel if the doctor says it's okay."

In the days that followed, Mitzi's mind returned time and again to that response of Len's. It was fair enough, he was being solicitous of her welfare, and his child's. But she would have preferred him to weep with joy at the idea of her coming to him. "Yes, yes," she had wanted him to shout, "come tomorrow, come today if you can get on a plane—I'll meet you at the airport with a chauffered limousine so we can make love on the way to my apartment!"

Mitzi gave herself a wry smile. It was like a scene from one of her father's most naive films, but it was what she wanted.

As for the old man himself, he had shelved his admiration for her and replaced it with contempt. She was the peasant population after a failed revolution. The dictator was in an ugly mood. "You're like your old lady," he screamed over the telephone. He would no longer come to the studio. "Tash was stubborn, too. Write me a lead role, I'd say to her. I'd plead—Tash, Tash, write a script with me in the lead. And would she do it? Never. She wrote big parts for the rest of them but never for me."

Mitzi knew the truth. Natasha had told her once. Maybe she had told Gary but he refused to hear it. She had done what he asked, written a great screenplay with a meaty part for Gary Heller. She had told the producer who she had in mind. The studio bought the script but cast a big name.

"I have to get off the line, Father," she said. "Len is due to call me."

With constant sniping going on between them, she was surprised when her father showed up at her apartment a week later, unannounced. The smug smile on his face suggested Academy Award nomination but they were not until February. "Is it okay to sit down?" he said, choosing a chair carefully. "Is this the one with the bomb under it? Here, I want you to look at something." Busily, he took a trade paper from his pocket and began unfolding it, finding

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the place where he had made a circle in red pencil. "Little story from north of the border."

Mitzi accepted the paper and glanced at the short article. It said: "Len Lamont, back in Montreal after a stay in Hollywood, is making waves in a key supporting role in *Blues for Nobody's Girl*," now being shot on location in the old town."

"I know all this," Mitzi said.

"Read on," Heller said, watching her face.

Mitzi read: "Renée Sauvé, who plays the female lead in the thriller, says she believes Lamont is destined for big things. She and the young newcomer are spending a lot of time together."

It hurt. It was what her father wanted. She couldn't control the expression on her face, try as she would to dismiss it in words. "This is show-business talk. They need something to write about."

"Yeah, sure." Heller was on his feet again, strutting the stage. "You wanted it this way, kid. Otherwise you'd never have let him go. The guy is not husband material."

She crumpled the paper against his chest as he went past. "Get out. You've delivered the news."

He refused to take it back, letting the pages slide down his front and hit the floor. "It can still be okay. We can get things back the way they used to be. Have the baby, Mitzi. Keep the baby. We'll look after it together, you and me."

"Are you crazy? You've gone crazy. You haven't seen or heard a thing that's happened with me in the last thirty years. Damn it, Father, I'm an abandoned child. You and Tash looked after yourselves, never me. And now you want to resume some blissful life that never happened in the first place? You put me on the back burner so you could enjoy yourselves, and now it's you and me together, bringing up baby? Rotten script, Father. It won't play."

There was enough anger here to get through to him. He adopted his comfortable belligerence in response. "So what are you going to do?"

"Get on a plane." Her subconscious mind had taken over. "Fly to Montreal. Tell Len it's time."

"They'll laugh you off the location."

"We'll see."

Heller was angry as she showed him the door. "If you go with that no-good, you'll never see another penny from me. How can you consider such a man? He's up there playing around with the first broad who catches his eye."

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"Am I supposed to laugh? You're describing yourself."

Rattling down the stairs, her father paused on the landing and turned, showing her an old, sad, lonely face. He had to dig to find enough hatred to animate it. "Better telephone and say you're coming," he said. "Give him time to air the bed."

Mitzi did no such thing. She bought her ticket and flew north. If Len was up to something with this actress, she wanted to get the true picture, not some doctored version intended to placate her until he could talk her back aboard the plane. Maybe she had become a burden to him. That made sense according to what she understood about men. She had been a meal ticket for the ailing Canadian while he was bouncing around L.A. unable to find work. It was possible that her father was right for once in his disreputable life.

At Mirabel Airport, she hired a car. She drove in to Montreal, feeling both confused and exhilarated. The city was impressive, the busy atmosphere reminding her somewhat of cities she had toured in Europe. The big hotels looked tempting but she had limited funds. She drove until she found a rooming house on a seedy street some distance east of the tall buildings. A French-speaking woman took her money, did not respond well to her Parisian accent, and gave her California clothes a few furtive glances of envy and contempt as she passed her a towel and a tiny cake of soap.

A faint voice inside Mitzi's head was trying to get her attention. It told her to telephone her man, tell him she was here, let him come and get her and take her to his place. They would make love and everything would be all right.

But there were louder voices that commanded her attention. She had been kicked around once too often. Shunted from pillar to post. Her father and mother never really wanted her, she had been a nuisance to them. At least Tash helped her with money, but Tash had gone to the grave without even bothering to provide for her. Left everything to that selfish, cold-hearted egotist of a so-called father. And now she had been forced to kill an innocent man. Almost innocent, only trying to get hold of some money. God alone knew what sort of monsters *his* parents had been.

Mitzi saw the mugger now as her partner in the misery of injustice. She and he had been united in their wish to see the end of Gary Heller. Shooting the boy had been a big mistake. She should have shifted her aim and put the bullet in her father's head.

Mitzi got into the car and drove the streets until after sundown. It occurred to her only well after dark that she had missed at least

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one meal. She found a cheap restaurant, where she put away a hamburger and chips that tasted like last year's cooking oil. It was highway robbery to pay good money for food this bad. She said something to the cashier about it and the entire staff of the tiny restaurant watched her as she drove away.

Where was his royal highness tonight? What was he doing at this moment, Len Lamont, the man who wasn't able to raise a finger to help himself in L.A. but as soon as he got back to Montreal fell into a meaty part. And into the arms of the lady called Renée Sauvé. Gary Heller was wrong about a lot of things but not about infidelity. He had a nose for the clandestine affair. The trade paper had said the newcomer and Sauvé were seeing a lot of each other. The message between those lines was loud and clear.

Mitzi parked beside a telephone booth, dialed Len's number at the apartment on Bishop Street. A woman answered. *"Allo?"* Her voice was that of the trained actress, deep and sensual.

"Renée Sauvé?"

"Oui, c'est moi."

"Monsier Lamont, est-il là?"

"Un instant, s'il vous plait."

Mitzi waited, taking such shallow breaths that her chest began to ache. When Len came on the line, he sounded like a little boy—anxious, embarrassed.

"Hello?"

She let him say the word three times before she put down the phone.

Her father was right. Of course he was right. A telephone call from California warning him of her visit would have cleared the interloper out of Len's apartment. He would have met the airplane and taken her home, loved her, shown her the town, made a fuss over her. After all, he *was* an actor. He could probably keep up indefinitely the pretense of caring for her. How fortunate that she had found out the truth before wasting the rest of her life on a man who was no better than the rest of them.

Driving toward Bishop Street, Mitzi began to hatch a plan. It was simple; the good ones always are. She would confront the pair of them in the love-nest. She would take Len apart verbally, and she would express her contempt and her sympathy for la Sauvé, who might end up living with the useless bastard. Then she would fly home, have the baby, concentrate on her painting and her child. If

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her scummy, vicious father wanted to contribute a few bucks to the support of his grandchild, she would not say no.

The address turned out to be an oldish apartment building of no great style. She managed to park across from the lighted entrance and was getting out of her car when she saw the familiar silhouette of Len Lamont opening the glass door, guiding through it a tall woman in a diaphanous wrap which rose high, partially to enclose an elaborate hairdo. High heels clicked on pavement as he conducted her to a low-slung sportscar and helped her into the passenger seat. Then he ran around and opened the other door and slipped down behind the wheel.

Mitzi switched on, pulled out, and followed their car. Her heart was racing now. Where were they off to, the showbiz lovers? It was Gary Heller all over again. Interesting how the pattern repeated itself. Give a man a little financial security—not much, only a little—and he began spreading himself about. How dear and sweet and loyal Len pretended to be in Los Angeles when he needed her support. Put him up here with his name on a contract and he couldn't wait to join the nightclub circuit with a sexy actress on his arm.

Where were they going? Mitzi didn't know the town so she simply followed along. The destination was some distance away. They traversed boulevards, then rounded a traffic circle leading into an industrial park, then out of it and on to a wooded area with a twisting road, houses spaced far apart, and the city lights behind them.

The chase was on, and had Mitzi cared to admit it she was enjoying it. The car she was driving had plenty of horses under the hood. It amused her now to tailgate. She pulled up close to the somber rear lights of the sportscar and held her position like a driver at the stock-car races taking advantage of the leader's slipstream. Len was trying to lose the car behind, but it was impossible on this winding road.

Mitzi put her foot down. She pulled out, began to pass, then hung in beside the other car, fender to fender, doing seventy. She glanced across and saw the dim outline of Len's head, could imagine the tense set of his jaw. The woman beside him was hardly visible. He braked to let the crazy driver pass. She slowed to match his speed and stayed level.

Len began blowing his horn. Mitzi had to laugh. Fool in a panic, what good did it do to blow the horn on a deserted road with the other car parallel?

By the time she became aware of the approaching headlights, it

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was too late. All three vehicles performed avoiding manoeuvers—the sportscar left the road and managed to stop in tall grass, the approaching truck put two wheels on the shoulder, Mitzi bore right into the space vacated by Len's car but her left front fender made contact with the truck bumper. It was enough to send her car over, over, over, over, then skidding on its side to end up partway through a barrier at the next turn in the road.

"Who was it?" Len asked a police officer three quarters of an hour later when they were taking the body away.

"American tourist." The cop shrugged his shoulders. "Must have been drunk." He wasn't much interested in the dead woman now that he had met the VIP passenger in the sportscar. "Are you okay, Mademoiselle Sauvé?"

"I am fine." The actress looked serious. "But I don't matter—I am seventy years old, my life is almost complete. Worry about this young man." She gave Len Lamont a motherly pat on the shoulder. "He has a woman he loves in California and a baby on the way. Theirs are the lives that matter."

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

In the hands of creative mystery writers, murder has turned up in virtually all types of settings imaginable, including those related to the creation of fiction itself. For example, some years ago Edward D. Hoch brought death to the annual awards festivities of the Mystery Writers of America in New York with *The Shattered Raven*. More recently, Max Allan Collins had his series sleuth investigate a killing at a mystery-fans gathering in Chicago with *Kill Your Darlings*. And Orania Papazoglou even found homicide at an assemblage of romance writers (*Sweet, Savage Death*). These kind attentions continue with the first two titles below.

For several years, Sir Godfrey Grant, successful English mystery writer, has convened his Golden Guillotine Club, comprising mystery authors both published and earnestly—even desperately—aspiring, and awarded the Guillotine for best work by a club member. In my experience, mystery authors are a comradely and supportive lot, but in B. M. Gill's *Seminar for Murder* (Scribners, $13.95) they are fiercely competitive, attacking each other's weaknesses with tongues razor sharp. When Inspector Tom Maybridge is invited to a club weekend at the Grant estate to address members on the realities of detection, someone provides—to his intense embarrassment—the reality of a corpse. Gill has done very good work in the past, and no less so here, with a subtle, probing tale of characters caught at their most exposed.

Joan Hess brings back Claire Malloy, bookseller, in *Murder at the Mimosa Inn* (St. Martin's, $13.95). Aside from the overbulky title, this is a welcome and amusing tale of the intrusion of real homicide where the pretend variety is supposed to prevail. The new owners of the Mimosa Inn, seeking to boost business, schedule a murder weekend, one of those recently popular events in which guests figure out whodunit in connection with a staged death. Malloy drags her archetypically resistant teenage daughter to the affair and discovers that her police nemesis and potential heartthrob, Lieutenant Peter Rosen, is also installed for the weekend. Who's for real at the inn, who's playing from a script, and why did a real killer join the proceedings?

The latest of Peter O'Donnell's Modesty Blaise novels is *Dead Man's Handle* (Mysterious Press, $15.95). This is much of a gut-grabbing piece with the rest of the series. The psychopathic villain here is Thaddeus Pilgrim, he of the angelic appearance and the desperately evil heart and mind. His depraved schemes, which he benignly calls scenarios, proceed out

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of his Hostel of Righteousness, a pseudo-religious infection headquartered on a Greek island. One of those schemes touches upon a friend of Modesty's and Willie Garvin's, and so Thaddeus devises an imaginative scenario to encompass all their deaths. Plan on consuming this at a single sitting.

Bill Pronzini carries his middle-aged and nameless detective another step along his personal pilgrimage in *Deadfall* (St. Martin's, $15.95). While on a simple car-repossession stakeout, "Nameless" comes upon a particularly brutal murder, hears the victim's dying word, and has a glimpse of the fleeing killer. In due course he's hired to investigate, which takes him into the machinations of the Purcell family, especially those of the victim's brother, a wealthy wheeler-dealer who is also dead—of a fall. The Purcells are a twisted lot, with unlovely tangled relationships, and Nameless comes at last to a truth he doesn't enjoy. Very well told, as usual, with the added appeal of a delightful secondary story line involving the ex-husband of Nameless's lady friend.

Inspector Charlie Salter of the Toronto police returns for a fourth time in *The Man Who Changed His Name* by Eric Wright (Scribners, $13.95). Here, Gerry, a woman who was briefly Charlie's wife twenty-five years ago, suddenly surfaces, demanding the police solve the two-month-old murder of a social worker. Charlie doesn't know what to make of her reappearance and his feelings about her. And he's by no means enchanted when ordered by his boss to check into the earlier police investigation and to placate Gerry, who has connections and could cause trouble. This is a delicate matter and Charlie carefully retraces the steps of his colleagues, without seeming to second-guess them and while keeping his ex-wife's long and deeply felt antipathy toward policemen from erupting. Wright's novels seem to get stronger and stronger, as Salter becomes an even more complete and engaging man, and as domestic matters are ever more expertly woven into the plot. Excellent work.

Tony Hillerman brings together his two Navajo policemen, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, in *Skinwalkers* (Harper & Row, $15.95). Hillerman's exploration of Navajo culture and religion are absolutely convincing, nigh unto spellbinding, and this seventh such novel fully satisfies that remarkably high standard. Lieutenant Leaphorn has three unsolved-homicide pins on his crime map of Indian territory and he's trying to find a connection among them that might get the investigation unsnarled. Meanwhile, someone tries to kill Officer Chee, motive unknown—a fourth crime in some obscure pattern? Eventually the thread most unwelcome to Leaphorn—Navajo witchcraft, skinwalking—appears, and Joe must deal also with his beloved wife, who exhibits all eight of the classic symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Don't miss *Skinwalkers* or any of Hillerman's crime stories.

The latest of Jane Langton's novels about Homer Kelly, scholar and professor and former police detec-

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tive, is *Good and Dead* (St. Martin's, $15.95). This explores the trials and tribulations of a suburban Massachusetts church, and if matters of Christian faith are dealt with in a depressing and superficial fashion, the prose is elegant and lyrical, the characters and relationships beautifully expressed. Homer and his wife Mary are attending Old West Church, a parish of Unitarians and Congregationalists beset with far too many funerals. It has a new minister, who is trying not very successfully to cope with a dying wife. It has numerous other members with terminal illnesses, and another who reaches out a helpful and supportive hand in all directions. A further member is in debt to the eyeballs starting a supermarket and another is climbing the corporate ladder over as many victims of his ambition as necessary. Fascinating story!

The fourth of William G. Tapply's tales about lawyer Brady Coyne is *The Marine Corpse* (Scribners, $13.95). Coyne serves the wealthy and influential around Boston, including "Senator" Benjamin Woodhouse and his adventurous nephew, Stu Carver. Carver, researching a novel among the city's down-and-out, is murdered and his family wants Carver's live-in Jewish girlfriend pried out of the townhouse Carver put in her name. This produces both deep ethical conflict and emotional engagement, and Coyne has to act out his disbelief of the police theory about Carver's death. *The Marine Corpse* is well plotted, intense, and expertly told—one of Tapply's best.

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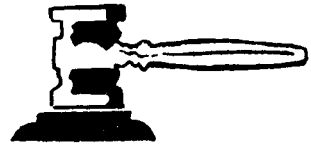

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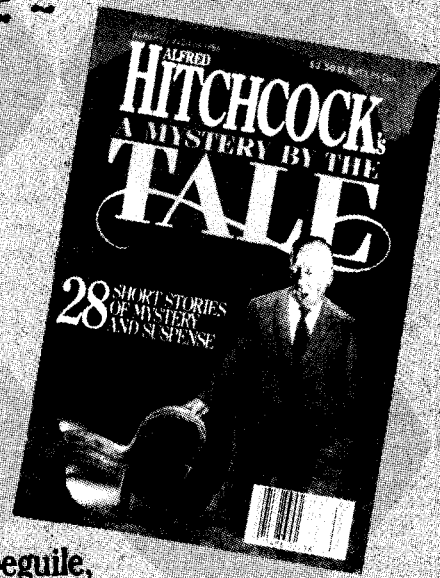

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Carol Amen's "Last Testament" initially appeared in the September 1980 issue of St. Anthony Messenger *and was reprinted for the first time a year later in* Ms. *magazine. John Sacret Young's screen adaptation of it,* Testament, *an Entertainment Events production in association with Public Broadcasting's American Playhouse, starred Jane Alexander and William Devane and was produced and directed by Emmy/Oscar winner Lynne Littman, who first saw the story in* Ms.

"It was so powerful, I immediately began thinking of it as a film," she said. "To be enthused enough to make a film," she added, "it must be something that will change my life, and by the same token, for the film to be worthy, it should somehow change the lives of people in the audience as well."

Received as a "small picture" by most reviewers (it was produced with a total budget of less than two million dollars), it was described by Variety *as a "tremendously moving depiction of people coping with nuclear holocaust," and Judith Crist called it a beautifully made film very much for our time: "Like it or not, we must think about the unthinkable."*

And so we must. If the Chernobyl disaster isn't enough to turn us around, reading "Last Testament" and/or seeing the impeccably realized movie made of it should. Nuclear accidents and aggression reflect modern man's nihilistic, Black Sun*like tendency toward suicide and murder. Geoffrey Wolff ended his compelling book about Harry Crosby's death by suicide-pact* (Black Sun) *by voicing the thoughts of a friend who denied that Harry had pulled the trigger: "Harry* talked *of suicide, of course. But he would never choose to die. Why would anyone choose to die?"*

Or kill? "Last Testament" poses the same questions on a cosmic scale . . .

"Q"

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LAST TESTAMENT

by CAROL AMEN

If I sound calm as I begin this, I'm not. Numb would be more like it. Drained, nearly hopeless. I'm writing to try to hold onto my sanity. It's something to do, a discipline. I will make every effort to tell what happened, no matter how painful the telling is. I want this record to be accurate, and in sequence.

March 23. Tonight as I fixed dinner and wrestled with self-pity because Tom had phoned saying he'd be staying late in San Francisco, the entire Eastern Seaboard was wiped out.

I had the TV in the kitchen tuned to the evening news from New York. When the video went off there was a bright *pop.* Then the screen went dark.

I moved to jiggle the knobs, expecting the usual apology about "technical difficulties," although now that I think of it, the sound was off, too. No static, no flickers—nothing.

Suddenly the picture came back, with an excited San Francisco announcer shouting, "Listen! Listen! We're being attacked!" The man's voice rose and broke. His manner bore no resemblance to the typical modulated accounts of international intrigue, assassination, natural disasters.

"Radar sources confirm. Many Eastern cities have already been destroyed."

The East, I thought, panic rising in my throat. My brother's Atlanta home. There must be some mistake.

Mary Liz and Brad, our older children, stared with me at the television. If only Tom were here. Maybe he would tell us it was a stunt, some Orson Welles trick for audience reaction. But as I looked at the TV crew, I knew it was no prank.

The announcer was hysterical. Sometimes the camera wasn't even focused. Over and over we could hear, "Massive retaliation." Was my brother's family really gone? I refused to think it was true.

Then came the same flash on the screen, only this time we could see it all around us. An eerie light coursed and flickered hideously.

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"Tom!" I screamed. "Tom!" *Was that San Francisco?* Scottie, almost three, began wailing as Mary Liz, Brad, and I ran outside. Brad, who's twelve and very logical, questioned whether we should look south toward the intense light. At fourteen, Mary Liz seems infinitely older than I. She didn't move her gaze for a second.

I thought it would be like a giant mushroom, but it was more of an inverted mountain. I stood transfixed as its funnel pulled life from the place my husband had been at three o'clock. "Tom. Oh, Tom," I whispered.

Other explosions, more distant, erupted like visual echoes to the first. I think there were six or seven.

Scottie whimpered and clung to my legs. Automatically I picked him up, just as the ground trembled beneath us. Earthquake. Oh, God, not that, too!

"Daddy might have left early, after all," Mary Liz whispered. "Sometimes he does. He could be halfway home by now for all we know." Mary Liz is like that. A dreamer, always hopeful.

"Daddy will come to us." I paused. "He will—if he can."

We went inside. I held Scottie close. "Brad, get the transistor and turn it to the Civil Defense station. Somebody will tell us what's happening."

All my life I've heard that "should there be an actual alert" we would be given emergency instructions. Back and forth we twisted the dials on the little radio, straining for the sound of authority, someone in charge. Nothing.

I ached to talk to my mother. She used to console me when I had nightmares. I reached for the phone, but there was no dial tone. Our electricity was off.

Brad spoke excitedly. "Mom, Mr. Halliday's radio set! He's got emergency power. He let our Scout troup talk to some Explorers up in Idaho."

In case Tom arrived, I left a note recording my intentions—to go over to Ab and Betty's—and the date and time: March 23. 7:15 P.M.

The scene at the Hallidays' was like something from a bad movie. As the minutes and hours dragged by, more and more people arrived. The room where Ab, Betty, Tom, and I had played so many games of pinochle was jammed shoulder to shoulder.

Ab was at his set and Betty darted in and out carrying terse bulletins. "Seattle gone." Or, "Just raised Yuba City. All safe." The brotherhood of "hams" was on duty—those that were alive.

We drank coffee, spoke inanely to one another, and tried to comfort

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the children. Around 11:00, Ab took a break and staggered out. Betty hurried to stand beside him. I felt his eyes bore into my very soul. He and Tom fished together. Betty had my husband bring back sourdough bread whenever he went in to the city.

"San Francisco's gone," Ab said hoarsely. "The entire Bay Area. I can't raise anyone there. We're on the fringe. I've found only one ham closer to San Francisco than us. Sacramento is silent—utterly silent. Southern California, too. A fellow in Twain Harte thinks they hit Yosemite. The sky is black with splinters—trees and rocks coming down like rain. It must've been a mistake. There's nothing strategic there. I can't even tell you some of the things I've heard." He swayed, and Betty tightened her embrace.

The room was deadly quiet. "We're the lucky ones. Survivors. Folks I reached in Northern California and Oregon. Rural areas. Small towns. Not near industrial or military installations. We may be cut off, but we're not crippled or dead. We're lucky."

I gathered the children and came home. I thought of stories I've read where a woman had lost a beloved husband. Those women shrieked, tore their clothes. I felt every bit as deranged as any story heroine I ever read about.

My husband. Oh, Tom. The dearest human being in the world. My rock. I am raw. My insides ripped out without anesthetic.

For hours I sat in Tom's chair by the window, trying to remember. I could almost see the flecks of amber in his eyes, feel the bristly little hairs that grew on the back of his hands. Once I thought I caught his unique scent. But I couldn't remember whether we had said, "I love you," when he left at six that morning.

I don't know what to do. Probably there *is* nothing to do. Before going to bed, I started this journal.

March 24. Parts of the day blurred. We ate. Washed dishes. Contacted friends. Feared the weather.

The sky is yellow and dark—almost like liquid instead of air. And hot. Nothing like normal for a northern coastal town in March. I am afraid. I would like to erase Ab's words, "We are the lucky ones."

Brad and I decided that if by some miracle Tom is on his way home, we might need gas to drive to a safer place. We went down to our regular station.

A ripple of fear shot through me when I saw Slim perched on a stool by the pumps with a rifle across his knees, directing his son in filling the tank of a battered Chevy.

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For a minute I considered driving away, but Slim came over and spoke politely.

"Mornin', missus," he said. "Your mister get home last night?"

"He'd planned to stay late in the city. We thought for a while—" I took a firmer grip on the wheel. "It looks like he didn't get out."

I saw pain on the weathered face. Tom often took Teddy, Slim's retarded son, along on his fishing trips. I used to begrudge, occasionally, that Tom spent precious time with this boy when his own children seldom saw him. Then I would feel guilty for my resentment.

"Gas, missus?"

"What are you charging?"

"It's free to my regular customers," Slim replied. "Don't figure credit cards is much good now."

"But I can pay. This is your business, not a charity."

"I done some thinkin' last night, missus. Me and Teddy don't need much. Food and a roof. When the gas is gone, we'll plant a garden. Go fishin'."

Brad leaned across the seat as Slim's son unscrewed our gas cap. "Then how come you've got that rifle, Mr. Sutton?"

"Just because I'm givin' gas away don't mean I'm a fool. There's been people here wantin' fill-ups. Them that's never seen the inside of this station, nor didn't have the time of day for Teddy."

My face burned and I chose my words carefully. "I'll accept the gas, Slim, if you'll let me have you and Teddy over for a meal. I want to repay you somehow."

"This gas's been paid for, missus. More than once. I just hope you can use it."

On the way home, we saw a crowd at the Catholic church, and went in. The mayor was huffing and puffing. Robbery of drugs from the pharmacy. Gas $100 a gallon at some stations. Might have to invoke martial law. He also advised drinking only bottled water and eating canned food.

I felt like laughing. A bomb that could level a city and shoot debris into the sky 150 miles away probably wouldn't have much trouble finding its way into my apricots.

The mood lifted a little when the clergy took over. Father Sweeney and our Methodist minister, Reverend Jansen, led us in prayer. Their faith is somehow heartening. They wear it like armor.

March 27. Our tree. Our tree. I cannot write today . . .

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March 29. I thought to find some relief for us. We packed lunch and pulled Scottie in his wagon. Intended to walk to the beach. But then we saw our tree.

Several years ago, families contributed trees and shrubs for roadside beautification. Ours was a flowering plum and Tom had dug the hole himself. Proudly we watched it through seasons of bloom, purple leaf, and bare branch. Just a couple of weeks ago we photographed the little beauty under a corona of blossoms. What delicate color. Then, the other day, as we crested the hill, we saw it again. Apparently it had come to leaf since our photo, but this didn't look like a plum tree in spring. It was—it was—

Papery tatters hung like shrouds from its limbs.

Mary Liz and Brad stared, uncomprehending at first. Then Brad murmured, "We're going to die, too, aren't we, Mom?"

We huddled together, trying not to look at the ashy leaves. I thought of those Exposure to Communicable Disease forms teachers sometimes send home when there's an outbreak of mumps or measles. The paper lists various diseases and the incubation period of each, and the teacher checks the appropriate box so the parent can be prepared. We have seen a plum tree—Nature's Exposure to Disease warning.

March 31. The first to go was the three-week-old infant of Cathy Pitkin, our former babysitter.

At a town meeting/prayer service, someone said tiny Susie's death was probably due to birth defects. I hurried over to see Cathy and her husband and found the young mother sobbing quietly.

"We thought we were so lucky," John muttered. "Didn't seem like there'd be any more bombs. Then poor little Susie had to get sick and die. 'Course I've tried to tell Cathy we're young. We can have another baby."

He said something about it being up to the survivors to continue, to repopulate the earth. I can't remember exactly. I just stared at him, wanting to reach over and pull his eyelids down over the indecent innocence in his eyes. Not even Brad is as naive as this boy.

"Don't know why she won't talk to you. She admires you. Had to nurse Susie just because you always nursed your babies."

"She nursed?"

"Oh, yeah. Susie hadn't had so much as a spoonful of cereal or canned baby food yet. Cathy was so proud of having plenty of milk.

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We gave her water, but we boiled it. You don't suppose the water was contaminated?"

"I think everything's contaminated, John. Try to comfort Cathy. Tell her Susie is better off. In a few weeks I think she'll understand."

April 2. Mary Liz is sure she heard a robin today. I wonder.

April 5. Twenty-some have died, and many more are sick. The symptoms vary. High fever, itching, dry skin. Some nausea. I thought hair would fall out, but perhaps they went too quickly for that.

At the time of the baby's death, I suspected it was an omen, just the beginning. When the others were stricken, though, I tried to pretend, to clutch at coincidence. It took a walk on the beach to convince me what I knew all along. I didn't tell the children what I saw, nor will I recount it here. *My magnificent ocean.* I pray God will forgive us for what we have done.

I resent having no one to talk to. My friends? Tell aloud the horrors I picture over and over? I think not. The journal helps a little.

April 7. I am worried about Scottie.

April 8. Scottie is feverish. Repeatedly he asks for the story of Peter Pan. Mary Liz sings, "I can fly, I can fly, I can fly." I cannot bear to listen. But I cannot bear to be far from him.

April 9. By turns Mary Liz and I bathe Scottie. Still the fever won't come down. I don't think he hears the crooning. My baby. My baby.

Many in town are dead. Most businesses are closed, as is the school. The newspaper comes out weekly now, only a single sheet with survival information. Garbage pickup continues irregularly, due to the gas shortage. Other services dependent on gas or electricity have been discontinued.

Two supermarkets and three tiny groceries are operational. The proprietors inventoried canned goods and are rationing them out fairly. They tell us that after everything returns to normal we can pay them back.

There is a theory that only the young and old will die. A few feel they are somehow strong, invulnerable. Ab Halliday came over. The Hallidays have lost two of their four children, but Ab is far from

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giving up. He is at the radio at least eighteen hours a day. By relay he has found people alive as far east as Nebraska.

My parents live (or is it lived?) in Iowa. In recent days I've caught myself talking out loud to my mother, asking her what she would do, leaning on her for advice and strength.

Ab has discovered that deaths are occurring everywhere, even in remote areas, yet he is determined all is not lost. I envy him his fiction.

April 11. Scott died yesterday at 1:30 P.M.

The three of us dug a deep hole in the back yard near the browning rose bushes. The cemetery is unspeakable. Rev. Jansen came and prayed with us. Mostly, he and the Catholic priest are conducting mass burials. About 700 so far.

Ironically, I think Reverend Jansen took as much comfort from us as we did from him. We became close when Tom's parents were killed in the car crash, and then again during my depression before Scottie was born. He is a good man.

In the midst of our pitiful little service, I thought of a night several years ago. It was right after a winter's rain, and I stood alone on the front porch. All the stars in the world, it seemed, had come out—thousands and thousands of them. I felt so alive. I remember standing on tiptoe to get closer to the beauty. "Life is good!" I shouted. For once I was glad of the solitude, for I would have been embarrassed if even Tom had heard me.

Then yesterday, in our back yard, I spoke of that moment. "Have you ever felt like that?" I looked at them one by one.

Mr. Jansen seemed to come back from a long way off. "I *have* been very happy at times. It's important that you remind us of such good feelings. Especially now." His voice seemed infinitely sad. "The past weeks I've felt so helpless."

He turned to Brad. "Have you ever experienced the feeling your mother described—glad to be alive?"

My son was silent a moment. "Maybe. Once up on the Hallidays' diving board, just before I jumped in. I don't mean diving—exactly. It was—oh, I can't explain. But I guess I know what Mom means."

Mary Liz reached for my hand. "For me, it was when Daddy came home from a trip. I loved us being together, with everything the way it belonged. Now I'd be satisfied just to see the stars."

Mr. Jansen gave each of us a brief pat, then walked slowly from the yard . . .

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April 12. At least 1,300 gone. More than half our population. Beale's Contracting picks up the bodies in one of their large dump trucks and bulldozes communal graves on the east edge of town. That's since the cemetery can't handle it any more.

Brad and Mary Liz fall into petty bickering at times and I want to scream, "We are dying! Can't you, for God's sake, love each other a few minutes?" Then without a word on my part, they make up and we sit together quietly, at peace.

After Scottie died, Brad kept proposing projects, games, brain teasers. But it didn't work. Nor can I find comfort in my garden. My plants are dead, and the only fragrance in the air is a stench—the smell of death from San Francisco, from Canada, from China, for all I know.

Then Brad had another idea. It happened after Larry's parents died and he moved in with us. Maybe to keep his friend busy, Brad suggested we organize a work detail for our street. He proposed that the four of us—he and Larry, Mary Liz and I—working by teams, make a morning check at each house in the neighborhood.

I had reservations about squandering our slight strength on others. But the people we visited seemed so grateful.

When we first called on a woman I'd quarreled with years ago, I thought I couldn't go through with it. She and I had fought over a supposedly stolen ball—claimed by each family of youngsters. We'd not spoken in ten years. Larry and I carried a jar of soup to her porch, waited down her hostile stare, then followed her inside.

She led me back to a bedroom where her daughter, once Mary Liz's playmate, lay in a stupor. For a terrible, timeless moment we forgot the past, in which we had been stupid, and the future, when we would be dead. It was the present. Two mothers helpless in front of a stricken child. Our arms groped for each other, and we clung together a long time, crying and inhaling the girl's cloying breath.

I asked Larry to finish rounds without me. At the end of our road, I fell to the dry grass of a vacant lot. I tore the earth. Retched. Screamed. I have no idea the length of time. I was demented. But I knew enough not to let the children see me.

April 14. We three need to be near, and Larry's presence doesn't intrude. Sometimes when we're resting one will tell a family story, recall a trip, something funny. "Remember the quilt in Grandma's guest room?" "Remember Monopoly?" "Remember Daddy?"

We're all getting slower now, and we wondered about the rounds.

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Mary Liz pointed out, "Their eyes light up so when we go in." We voted to continue. Because of the deaths we have fewer houses to call at but it takes us longer. We have brought two young children to Scottie's old room. They will not be here long, I'm afraid.

April 15. This used to be Income Tax Day. Now it marks Beale's switch from bulldozing to burning. It takes less strength to torch the bodies than it does to drive the big cat that opened the graves.

April 24. Larry died suddenly a day or two ago. He had gone in the morning on rounds and that afternoon crawled into his bunk and died. I regret not noticing how quiet he had become. His mother was my friend and our boys have been close for years. I wish I had told her I'd take care of Larry, but she died too soon.

We pulled the body of that sweet, uncomplaining boy over to the corner for pickup and I remembered some lines of Millay's.

> Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
> Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
> Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
> I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

Odd how close I feel to all poets, craftsmen, and workers who have ever tried to make a statement. Will anyone survive to gaze at Michelangelo's creations, a Navajo rug, or my own scribblings?

May 1. Mary Liz collapsed today. As I sit beside her and write, I suspect that with her also the battle will be brief. She calls out for reassurance I cannot muster.

I was strong with Scottie. But I cannot seem to steel myself for this. I long for those days when I could afford depression, tantrums, counseling, and comfort in Tom's arms.

This is my firstborn. My beautiful daughter. She brushes hot fingers against the sheet. Who will comfort *me* when she is gone? She asks for a drink. Something I can give. She asks for her Daddy. Something I can't.

When she was little, she reacted in outrage if she were hurt or frustrated. I can see her stamping her small foot, throwing back her head to challenge Tom or me. Or was it Brad who stamped his foot, and Mary Liz the docile one? It's hard to remember.

From his rounds alone today, Brad brought home a man. This sick creature is a pitiful shell. Occasionally he staggers from his bed to the kitchen to grab food and hoard it in his room. Why can't he trust

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us to care for him? I have no pity to spare. Brad says it's better to have him here than go a block and a half to check him several times a day.

Later, after resting, Brad walked clear over to the Hallidays' for news. There is no one left to drive Beale's truck. Dear Betty Halliday and all their children are gone. Ab sent word with Brad we should move over there. He dares not leave his radio. The fool. Nearly all his hams are silent now. But he thinks some miracle may save us yet.

Is Mary Liz alive? She is so still. Oh, Tom, I scream in my soul. Tom, *you* are the lucky one not to have to watch our children die!

I am sick myself. It is so hard to concentrate. Perhaps I don't make sense. Sometimes I read back over what I have written and the words swim. What was my point? Why do I not save my strength? I keep arguing the journal is important. My link to sanity, to civilization.

Probably May 3. Mary Liz is gone. I made a winding sheet and Brad and I dragged her to the back yard, to the raw dirt on top of Scottie's grave. We sat beside her, staring, waiting for some ease to the pain. After forever, Brad began, "Our Father, who art in heaven—" It took us a long time to say it. We kept forgetting and had to start again and again.

I am getting sicker, but Brad shows no signs of weakening. I will try to hold on a while longer. I think I can manage.

Brad tries so hard to be a man. No, he *is* a man. He's so like you, Tom. He went out again yesterday, right after Mary Liz—I cannot say the word that means the end of our daughter. But Brad went out. He says Mr. Jansen died several days ago. He found the priest staggering. He and Jansen had promised each other they would call at every home and pray with the sick. Brad helped him for a while. They found three people alive.

May 5, I think. Today Brad brought home Teddy from the gas station. He reminds me of Scottie in his confusion. Slim must have died days ago. Brad said their house was in an awful state.

Days later. Yesterday, in Brad's walk, he found Ab like a zombie at the radio set. He had to slap him to get a response. The man hadn't left his radio for four days or nights. In all that time—silence.

It finished him, Tom. His hope lasted longer than anybody's. Brad

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says Ab asked to come over here. He started up out of his chair. Then fell to the floor. No pulse.

Brad walked home. Told me about Ab. Admitted he is sick now, too. Our time surely must be short. I thought to end it for us three together, in the garage. Slim had hoped we could use the gas. And that way no one would be left alone at the end.

I went out to check the car. The battery is still alive. How ironic the inanimate objects fare so much better. Such effort to start the car. Each movement laborious, slow motion. Then back to get Teddy and Brad. Teddy had found Tom's favorite fishing rod. Held it clutched to his cheek like a security blanket. Brad sitting nearby, eyes closed.

I thought there could be no surprises left. But I find I cannot do it. What right have I? We will go soon enough. I pray God will help me stay awake, take them first.

Final entry. If survivors come here. Want them to know something. We didn't act like animals. Most people were good. Helped. Tried.

If only we could have lived as well as we have died.

I wish—

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a *NEW* Boley-McKee story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Boley had just finished paying his first-half taxes and was pocketing the receipt when he recognized the voice of his old friend, the sheriff. "You payin' with what you got from Sewell McCutcheon?" McKee asked.

"Some. It took a little extra. All I did was scoop him two holes in the creek for trout to loll around in from now on."

"You did more than that, Boley," McKee said. "You might have provided him with a fortune. Or part of one . . ."

COME DOWN FROM THE HILLS

by JOHN F. SUTER

Arlan Boley eased his backhoe down the ramp from the flatbed, cut the motor, and climbed off. It was early in the morning in the dry season of late August, but the dew was just starting to rise. Boley knew that the oppressiveness of the air would pass, but he hated it all the same.

"You want me to do the first one along about here?" he asked. He brushed at his crinkly blond hair where a strand of cobweb from an overhanging branch had caught.

Sewell McCutcheon, who was hiring Boley's services for the morning, walked to the edge of the creek and took a look. He picked up a dead sycamore branch and laid it perpendicular to the stream. "One end about here." He walked downstream about fifteen feet and repeated the act with another branch. "Other end here."

Boley glanced across the small creek and, without looking at McCutcheon, asked, "How far out?"

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The older man grinned, the ends of his heavy brown moustache lifting. "We do have to be careful about that." He reached into a pocket of his blue-and-white coveralls and took out a twenty-five-foot reel of surveyor's tape. He laid it on the ground, stooped over to remove heavy shoes and socks, and rolled the coveralls to his knees.

He unreeled about a foot of tape and handed the end to Boley. "Stand right at the edge and hold that," he said, picking up a pointed stake about five feet long.

While Boley held the tape's end, McCutcheon stepped down the low bank and entered the creek. The dark brown hair on his sinewy legs was plastered against the dead-white skin from the knees down. When he reached the other side, he turned around. "She look square to you?"

"A carpenter couldn't do better."

McCutcheon looked down. "Fourteen and a quarter feet. Midway's seven feet, one and a half inches. I don't know about you, Boley, but I hate fractions."

He started back, reeling up tape as he came. "Seven feet, three inches from her side. I'll just give her a little more than half, then she can't complain. Not that she won't."

He plunged the stake in upright at the spot. Then he waded ashore, went to the other boundary, and repeated the performance.

"That's the first one. When you finish," he told Boley, "come down just opposite the house and we'll mark off the second one."

"How deep?" Boley asked.

"Take about two feet off the bottom," McCutcheon said. "Water's low now. When she comes back up, it'll make a good pool there. Trout ought to be happy with it."

"I'll be gettin' to 'er, then," Boley said, going back to his machine. He was already eyeing the spot where he would begin to take the first bite with the scoop. He began to work within minutes. He had moved enough dirt with his backhoe in the past to know what he was doing, even with the added presence of the water that soaked the muck. There was also an abundance of gravel in the piles he was depositing along the bank.

When he judged that he had finished the hole, he lifted the scoop until it was roughly level with the seat. Then he swung the machine around and ran it down the creek toward his next worksite.

The pebble-bottomed stream, one typical of West Virginia, was known as Squirrel Creek. It divided two farms of nearly flat land

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at an altitude between one and two thousand feet. On the eastern side was McCutcheon's well kept eighty acres. McCutcheon, a recent widower, planned well and worked hard, aided by his son and daughter-in-law. Both sides of the stream were lined with trees whose root systems kept the banks from crumbling and silting the creek bed. This was deliberate on McCutcheon's part, happenstance on his neighbor's.

When Boley came down opposite McCutcheon's white frame two-story, he cut the motor and walked over to where the farmer was sitting on the steps of his porch. The house was on a small rise, with a high foundation that would protect it in the event of an unusually heavy flash flood. Because of this, Boley had to look up a few inches to talk to McCutcheon.

"See anything of her?" he asked.

"Not yet," the farmer answered.

"Maybe this isn't gonna bother her."

McCutcheon rubbed his moustache. "*Everything* about this stream bothers that woman, Arly. One of the biggest trout I ever hooked in there was givin' me one helluva fight one day. I was tryin' to play him over to this side, but I hadn't yet managed it. Then, all of a sudden, outa nowhere came the old woman, screechin' her head off. 'What d'you mean ketchin' *my* fish?' she squawks. And with that she wades right out into the water, grabs the line with both hands, and flops that trout out on the ground at her side of the creek. Whips out a knife I'da never guessed she had and cuts the line. Then off to the house with my catch."

"Well," said Boley, "it was on her half of the creek, wasn't it? Property line down the middle? That why you've been measurin'?"

"Oh, sure," the farmer replied. "I recognize that. But that's not the way she looks at it. Had the fish been over here, she'd still have done it."

"I'd better get at it while it's quiet," Boley said, mentally thankful for his own Geneva's reasonableness.

As he walked to his machine, he heard McCutcheon say, "She must be away somewhere."

Later, Boley finished piling the last of the scooped silt and rocks on the bank of the stream. McCutcheon would later sort out the rocks and use the silt in his garden.

Paid for his work, Boley put the backhoe on the flatbed and fastened it securely. He turned around to head out, when he glanced over the creek toward the brown-painted cottage on the other side.

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A battered red half-ton pickup was just pulling up to the front of the house, barely visible through the tangle of bushes between stream and house.

A rangy older woman with dyed jet-black hair jumped from the truck and began to force her way toward the creek.

"Arlan Boley!" she screamed. A crow's voice contained more music. "What're you doin' over there?"

Boley put the truck in gear and pushed down the accelerator. He had no wish to talk to Alice Roberts. Leave that to McCutcheon.

Six days later, Boley and his family went into town. While Geneva and the two children were making some minor purchases for the opening of school, Boley went to the courthouse to the sheriff's office.

He had just finished paying his first-half taxes and was pocketing the receipt when he was tapped on the shoulder.

"Guess I'll have to wait 'til spring now before I can get you for non-payment," a voice said.

Boley recognized the voice of his old friend, the sheriff. "Hi, McKee," he said, turning. "You want that place of mine so bad, make me an offer. I might surprise you."

"No, thanks," McKee replied. "More'n I could handle." He nodded toward the clerk's window. "You payin' with what you got from Sewell McCutcheon?"

"Some. It took a little extra." He looked at McKee with curiosity. "What's the big deal? All I did was scoop him two holes in the creek for trout to loll around in from now on."

"You did more than that, Boley. You might have provided him with a fortune. Or part of one."

Boley nudged McKee's shoulder with his fist, feeling the hardness still existing in McKee's spare frame. "Don't tell me he panned that muck and found gold."

"You're not far off the mark."

Boley's eyes widened. He noticed a tiny lift at the ends of McKee's lips and a small deepening of the lines in the sheriff's tanned face. "Well, get to it and tell me," he said.

"Maybe you heard and maybe you didn't," McKee said, "but a state geologist's been usin' a vacant office here in the courthouse for the last ten days. Been workin' in the lower end of the county tryin' to see if there's a coal seam worth explorin' by that company that owns some of the land. Anyway, today McCutcheon walked in lookin' for him. Said he needed an opinion on an object in his pocket."

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"And he got his interview?"

McKee nodded. "It seems he pulled out a fair-sized rock. First glance, could have been quartz or calcite. Kinda dull—but somehow different. This state fellow thought at first it was another pebble, then he took a good look and found it wasn't."

"So what *did* he find it was?"

"A diamond."

Boley had been half anticipating the answer, but he had tried to reject it. His jaw dropped. "No kidding!"

"No kidding."

"McCutcheon's probably turning over every rock out of that stream."

The sheriff dipped his chin. "I'll bet. Geologist said it's what they call an alluvial diamond, and the probability of findin' more is very small. Said it was formed millions of years ago when these mountains were as high as the Himalayas or higher. Somewhere in all that time, water eroded away whatever surrounded this one, and it might have even washed down here from someplace else. Come down from the hills, you might say."

An odd feeling crossed Boley's mind. Several times in the past, fragments of an old ersatz folk song had made themselves recognizable at the fringe of an unpleasant situation. "Just come down from the hills" was in one of the verses.

"What's the matter?" McKee asked.

"Nothing. How big is this rock? What's it worth?"

"A little bigger than the last joint of my thumb, not as big as the whole thumb. Worth? The man told McCutcheon there's no way of knowin' until it's cut. And it might be flawed."

Boley stared into the distance. "I'd better get on home and start seein' what's in the bottom of that run that goes through my property. Everybody in the county'll be doin' the same thing wherever there's water." He paused. "Or does anybody else know?"

"Only McCutcheon, that geologist, and the two of us," McKee said. "There's sort of an agreement to keep our mouths shut. You never know who would get drawn in here, if the word got out. Don't you even tell Geneva."

"What's McCutcheon done with the thing?"

"I suggested that he should put it in a safety-deposit box."

"It's what I'd do. I hope he has," Boley said.

The quirk around McKee's mouth had gone. "You know Alice Roberts?"

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"Miner's widow across the creek from McCutcheon?"

"That's the one."

"No. I've seen her. She evidently knows who I am. I don't think I want to know her."

"Not good company," McKee said. "I wonder if she's heard about this. Do me a favor, would you? Drop by McCutcheon's place before long. You have a good excuse—checkin' up on the job you did. See what you can find out, but don't let on what you know."

Boley gave him a thoughtful look. "Seems to me you know a lot already."

The following evening, Boley left home on the pretext that he wanted to look at some land where he might be asked to make a ditch for a farmer who wanted to lay plastic pipe from his well pump to a new hog house. Instead, Boley went to McCutcheon's.

He found the farmer sitting alone on his porch. The sun had not quite set. His son and daughter-in-law had gone into town.

"Hello, Sewell," Boley said, walking to the foot of the steps. "Water cleared yet where I dug 'er out?"

"If it ain't by now, it never will," McCutcheon said. "Come up."

Boley went up and sat in a cane-bottomed rocker like the farmer's. "Ever since I dug it out, I've been wonderin' why you did that," he said. "After all, you have a pretty good farm pond at the back. Fed by three springs, stocked with bass and blue gills, isn't it?"

McCutcheon smiled. "That's right. Bass and blue gills. But no trout. Running water's for trout. I like variety."

"You put all that gunk on your garden yet?"

"Oh, yeah. We just took a bunch of rakes and dragged all the rocks and pebbles out, let the muck dry some, then shoveled 'er into a small wagon, towed 'er to the garden, and that was it."

Boley looked at the gravel drive leading from the house to the main road. "I guess you can bust up the rocks and fill in some potholes when you get more."

McCutcheon seemed uninterested. "I suppose. I have a small rock pile out there. Don't know what I'll do with 'em."

Boley decided that the other man was keeping his secret. He wondered if the son and daughter-in-law knew. And if they could keep quiet. To change the subject, he said, "Anybody ever want to buy your land, Sewell?"

The farmer nodded. "Every now and then some developer comes

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by. Thing is, this isn't close to the lake and the recreation area, and they don't want to offer much."

"It's a good bit for the three of you to handle."

"Maybe it will be later," McCutcheon agreed. "That's when I'll think again."

Boley jerked his head toward the Roberts property. "I'd think they'd get that over there for the price they want."

"Funny old gal," McCutcheon said. "Her husband was a miner, died of black lung. No children. He never had time to work the property. Thirty-nine acres, came down from his old man. Alice like to wore herself out years ago, tryin' to make somethin' of it, then gave up. Except she thinks the place is worth like the middle of New York City—*and* that the creek belongs to her, clear to where it touches my land. You understand any better?"

"I see the picture," Boley answered, "but I don't understand the last part."

"Neither do I," McCutcheon admitted. "How about a cold beer?"

"Fine," Boley said.

McCutcheon went into the house to get it. He had been gone for several minutes when Boley heard footsteps coming around the house from the rear. He turned and saw Alice Roberts at the foot of the steps. She began to talk in a loud voice. "So. Both of you'll be here together—the two of you who took that diamond out've my crick. And how many more we haven't heard about yet."

Boley stood up. "What diamond? I don't know what you're talkin' about, Mrs. Roberts."

She continued up the steps. Boley guessed her to be in her early sixties, but her vigor was of her forties.

"Don't you lie to me, mister!" she growled, sitting in the chair he had just vacated. "You know all about it. I saw you here the day it came out of the water. What cut is he giving you?"

Boley leaned against a porch post. "I'm not gettin' any cut of any kind, lady. I've been paid for diggin' some dirt and rocks out of the water for McCutcheon. I don't see where any diamond comes into it."

McCutcheon reappeared at the door, carrying two cans of cold beer. He gave one to Boley. "Alice," he said, "I didn't know you were here. Could I get you some cola?"

"The only thing you can get me is the diamond you stole from my crick."

McCutcheon glanced quickly at Boley, who continued to look puz-

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zled. "There's some mistake, Alice. I never took anything of yours. Did you lose a diamond in the water?"

"No, I did not lose *anything* in the water," she snapped. "You found out a big diamond was in my crick and your crony fished it out. I want it."

"I made two fishin' holes in my side of the water," McCutcheon said. "I got some rich dirt for my garden and a heap of rocks. You can have every rock in that pile, if you like."

She got to her feet. "I'll take you up on that. There might be more diamonds in there that you missed. I'll go get the pickup." She went down the steps at a speed that awed Boley.

He turned to McCutcheon. "What was that all about?"

The farmer began to talk in a low tone. "Water's down more and she can get across on steppin' stones, so she'll be back in a hurry." He proceeded to tell Boley the same story McKee had. Boley did not admit to its familiarity. Instead, he said, "How did she find out?"

"Beats me," McCutcheon answered. "But if you don't want a bad case of heartburn, you'd better leave right now. I'm used to it. It won't bother me."

"The diamond—"

"Is in the bank."

Boley was unable to tell McKee about this for several days. He had necessary work at home, getting in apples from his small orchard. He was also getting in field corn for a very sick neighbor.

After a little more than a week, he went to the courthouse. On the walk outside he was stopped by a friend. Harry Comstock, a quiet, balding man with thick glasses, drew maps for Border States, Inc. Border States harvested timber and was as efficient as the businesses that got everything from slaughtered pigs except the squeal. At times the company leased land for its operations; at others, it drew on its own land. Some of their holdings abutted the land owned by McCutcheon and Alice Roberts.

"Boley!" Comstock said. "Got a minute?"

"One or two."

"Won't keep you." Comstock squinted in the sun. "Didn't you do some work on Squirrel Creek for Sewell McCutcheon right recently?"

"Yeah. Scooped out a couple of fishin' holes for him," Boley said, hoping no more information was asked for.

"Well, you must have started something. Or maybe it's just coincidence. You know what happened yesterday? He came to the

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office and made a deal to buy fifty more acres from us to add to his land. All rights."

"Whereabouts?"

"Beginning at the creek and going east five acres, then back upstream."

"I'll bet it costs him," Boley said.

Comstock shook his head. "Not too much. Stuff in there's mostly scrub. Company's been wishing this sort of thing might happen."

Boley began to speak, but Comstock went on. "What makes it *real* interesting is that that wild old Alice Roberts came barging in about an hour later and bought twenty acres on the opposite side of the creek. Only hers is two acres west, the rest upstream. Again, all rights. What's goin' on?"

Boley looked blank. "Beats me. Did Alice Roberts pay for hers now?"

"In cash."

Boley studied the pavement. "That's the funny part, Harry. I can't give you any answers, most of all about that."

He went into the courthouse and sought McKee. The sheriff was in.

After McKee had closed his office door, Boley ran through all that had happened, including the recent land purchases.

"I figure what they're doin' is buyin' more land along that stream so they can hunt for more diamonds without Border States gettin' into it," he finished.

McKee's head was cocked to one side. "What it really sounds like is that Alice intended to go up there and buy up land on both sides of the water and cut Sewell off. He beat her to enough of it that she didn't want to push, or she would have stirred up Border States."

"Oh, well," said Boley. "It's none of our business."

"I hope you're right," said McKee, his voice dry and astringent. "I wish you'd keep your eyes and ears open, anyway. When there's somethin' in dispute that might be valuable, I always feel I might be on the hot seat. Somebody'll be in this jail out of this, is my guess."

The following morning, Boley had left home in his four-wheel-drive jeep to help an acquaintance assess the feasibility of gathering bittersweet from a difficult location in the man's woods. With autumn coming, the colorful plant was easily saleable for decorations to tourists passing through town.

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He had completed the trip and was starting home after returning the man to his house. Looking down the long corridor of trees before him he couldn't see the highway. The lane swung to the right for a few hundred feet before meeting the paved road. He slowed and made the curve, then stopped abruptly. The lane was blocked by a familiar battered red pickup. Standing beside it was Alice Roberts.

He climbed from the jeep. "Mrs. Roberts. What do you want?"

The woman was expressionless. "Mornin', Boley. I want you to get back in your jeep and follow me."

Boley considered several replies. He answered evenly, "I'm afraid I can't do that. If you have work for me, there are some people ahead of you."

"I never said anything about that," she rasped. "How do you think I found where you were?"

"I suppose you called, and my wife told you."

"I didn't call, but she told me." She moved aside and opened the truck door.

Boley stared. Inside, very pale and very straight, sat Geneva.

There was a movement beside him and Boley's eyes dropped. Alice Roberts was holding a double-barrel shotgun in her hands.

"Woman," he said, "shotgun or no shotgun, if you've hurt Geneva, I'll stomp you to bits."

"Don't get excited, Boley," she replied. "Nobody's hurt—yet. Now, you get behind that wheel and follow me."

Forcing himself to be calm, Boley did as he was told. He watched Alice Roberts climb into the truck and prop the gun between the door and her left side. Then she started, turned, and drove out.

Boley followed, driving mechanically. He paid little attention to direction or time. Rage threatened to take control, but he refused to let it. He might need all of his wits.

He wasn't entirely surprised when he saw that they had reached McCutcheon's farm and were pulling into the drive leading to the front.

The truck stopped directly before the steps to the front porch. With her surprising agility, Alice Roberts came down from the driver's seat carrying the shotgun, darted around the front of the pickup, and opened the other door to urge Geneva out.

Boley pulled up behind the truck and got out. He walked over to his wife and put his arm around her quivering shoulders.

"Arly. What's this all about?" she whispered.

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"I'm not sure I know," he murmured.

"Quit talkin'!" snapped the woman. "Just behave yourselves and nobody'll get hurt. Now get up there."

She followed them up to the porch and banged on the screen door. "McCutcheon! You in there? Come out!"

There was no answer. She repeated her demands.

Finally a voice came faintly through the house. "Come on around to the west side."

Boley took Geneva's arms and urged her down from the porch, Alice Roberts' footsteps impatient behind them. They went around the house to the right. Waiting for them, leaning against a beech tree, was Sewell McCutcheon.

The farmer's eyes rounded with surprise. "This is more than I expected," he said. "Why the gun, Alice?"

"To convince you I mean business. If I pointed it at *you*, you might think I was foolin'. I hear these folks got two kids, so you'll think a bit more about it. There's shells in both these chambers."

"What do you want, Alice?"

"I want to see that diamond. I want to look at it. I want to hold it."

"We'd have to go to the bank. It's in a safety-deposit box."

Alice lifted the gun. "You're a liar, Sewell McCutcheon. How do I know? I went to the bank yesterday and asked to rent a box the same size as yours. And what did the girl say? 'We don't have a box rented to Mr. McCutcheon.' Now you get that diamond out here."

McCutcheon looked from one to another of the three. "All right. You go sit on the porch. I have to go in the house. You can't ask me to give my hidin' place away to you."

"I could, but I won't," Alice answered. "And don't you try to call anybody or throw down on me with your own gun."

McCutcheon's only answer was a nod. He went rapidly up to the side door and into the house. Boley led Geneva up to a swing that hung near the front end of the porch and sat down on it with her.

Alice followed. "If you're thinkin' about those other two who live here, fergit it. They went off down to Montgomery earlier." She leaned against a stack of firewood McCutcheon had put up to season.

After what seemed to Boley to be an interminable time, the farmer reappeared. He carried a cylindrical plastic medicine container about two inches long and an inch in diameter.

"We'd best go down into the sun," he said. "You can get a better idea."

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He led the way down into the yard toward the stream, out of the shade of the trees surrounding the house. He stopped, opened the container, and shook something into his right palm. He offered it to Alice.

"Here it is."

She plucked it from his hand and peered at it.

"Why, it looks just like a dirty quartz pebble or some of them other rocks," she muttered. "This is a diamond? An uncut one?"

"It is. It's real," McCutcheon answered. "I can prove it, too."

She stared at it, letting the sun shine on it. "Well, some ways you look at it— A real, honest-to-God diamond, pulled outa my crick! McCutcheon, all my life I've wanted one nice thing to call my own."

The farmer pulled at his moustache. "Well, Alice, I'm sorry for you, but it came off my property. It came outa my side."

She raised her eyes to his. "How about you get it cut? Cut in two parts. Let me have half."

McCutcheon reached over and removed the stone from her hand. "Alice, you've been too much trouble to me over the years. Threatenin' these people with a shotgun is just too much."

"Shotgun!" she yelled. "I'll give you shotgun!"

She raised the gun swiftly, reversing it, and grasping the barrels with both hands, she clubbed McCutcheon across the back of the head. He fell to the ground, bleeding.

Stooping, she pried his fingers open and took the stone from them. "I'm not gonna let you take it!" she cried, running to the creek. When she reached the bank, she drew back her arm and threw the diamond as hard as she could into the woods upstream from her house. "Now," she yelled, "it's where it belongs! I might be forever findin' it, but you ain't gonna get it!"

Boley retrieved the gun where she had dropped it. "Go inside and call the sheriff," he told Geneva. "Say we need paramedics for Sewell."

When the sheriff's car and the ambulance came, McCutcheon was unconscious. Alice Roberts sat by the creek, ignoring everything until they took her to the car in handcuffs.

Boley explained the morning's events to McKee, who had come with a deputy. The sheriff heard him out. "Sounds like we've got her for kidnaping and assault, at least."

Alice Roberts, in the police car, heard them. "Kidnaping?" she said. "They's only old empty shells in that gun."

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McKee leaned in the window. "But they didn't know that, Alice." To Boley, he said, "And don't you back off on the charge."

"I won't," Boley promised. "I'm just glad it's over."

McKee gave him an odd look. "If you think that, you've got another think comin'. Let's do today's paperwork, then come see me late tomorrow afternoon."

When Boley arrived at his office late the next day, the sheriff closed the door and waved him to a seat. "Things are pretty much as I figured," he said.

"How's McCutcheon?" Boley asked. "And what about Alice?"

"Sewell's not too bad." McKee sat down. "He's gettin' a good goin' over for concussion, but that's about it. Alice is still locked up, which is where I want her." He leaned across the desk. "How's it feel to be a cat's-paw?"

Boley was startled. "There's some kind of set-up in this?"

McKee sat back. "I'll run it past you. Some of this I can't prove and we'll just have to wait and see what happens. Anyway, you know same as I do that one of this county's big hopes is to attract people with money to buy up some of this land. Build themselves a place where they can come weekends or for the summer. The trouble is, we have only one good-sized lake and one nice recreation area. There are lots of other good places, but developers want to pick 'em up for peanuts.

"Alice Roberts, poor soul, has a place that looks like the devil's back yard. But it wouldn't take a lot to make it presentable, and it lays well. Sewell's place looks good. Given the right price, he'd quit and retire."

"I'm beginning to get an idea," Boley said. "McCutcheon decided to start a diamond rush, is that it? Where'd he get the stone?"

"You dug it out for him," McKee replied. "Until then, everything was just what it seemed. You dug two fishin' holes. Then he did find the diamond, and all that hush-hush commenced.

"I'd say he called Alice over and had a talk. Showed her how they could put on an act, building things up to her sluggin' him, so his discovery would really hit the papers."

Boley said, "So they bought that land from Border States hoping to resell and clean up. But where did Alice get the money?"

"Maybe she had some put back. But I'd bet Sewell made her a loan."

"The diamond. Is it real?"

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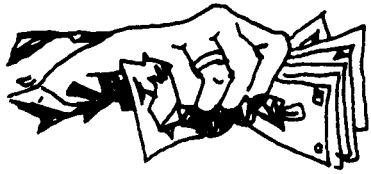
McKee grinned. "It's real. The state man wouldn't lie about that."

"You want me to press the kidnap charge."

"I do. And I've had the hospital keep McCutcheon sedated, partly to keep him from droppin' the assault charge. You hang on until I suggest you drop it."

Boley was still puzzled. "What about the diamond? She threw it into the woods. I saw her."

"You saw her throw something into the woods. Remember I said you might mistake it for dirty quartz or calcite? That's probably what Sewell let her throw away." McKee's amusement grew. "Another reason for keepin' her locked up—I want McCutcheon to have time to go over there and 'find' that stone again." He added a postscript. "Or maybe they'll leave it as an inducement for whoever buys Alice's place."



DETECTIVERSE

CRYPTIC REMARK

by GLORIA ORLICK

He killed his wife, did Uncle Jake,
By sprinkling cyanide on her cake.
He buried her in the potato cellar,
Where she was discovered by Detective Heller,
Who then told Jake: "You made a grave mistake."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Jessica might have remained incurious about the strange behavior of the young man on the beach had not his blondness and tall, husky build reminded her of Robert. And gradually he provoked in her an unreasonable hostility, as if indeed he were Robert and she an invisible observer of his adulterous behavior.

A deft new story for Donald Olson's many fans, who know his skill at irony and will not be disappointed . . .

THE SIGNAL

by ***DONALD OLSON***

Jessica had chosen Orange Cove for her purpose because here is where she had spent the happiest week of her life on her honeymoon with Robert. Before accomplishing that purpose, she wanted time to recapture the emotion of those enchanted days, visit the same sights, eat in the same restaurants, sleep in the same bed, look out at the sea from the same window. Here she waited until some inner voice would signal the moment to do what she had come here to do. She had emerged from a long, grey twilight of despair following the break-up of her marriage and her mind was now at peace—clear and cloudless as the deep-blue sky over the Gulf.

She spoke to no one and wrote to no one except, finally, for a single postcard to her father in Boston telling him nothing but her address—the Tidal Reef Inn at Orange Cove.

Jessica's was not a state of mind likely to be easily aroused from its apathy of resignation, and so for several evenings as she sat alone on the terrace outside her room her mind registered with no more than an animal awareness that mysterious activity across the plaza from the motel.

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A public phone booth stood at the edge of the beach almost directly across from the Tidal Reef. One night Jessica chanced to see a man appear from a clump of palms sheltering the phone booth. He stood there for no more than five minutes when the phone suddenly rang, clearly audible to Jessica up on her terrace. Instantly the man seized the phone receiver but appeared to hang up after only the briefest of conversations, then he vanished behind the trees in the direction of the beach.

After the same thing happened on four successive nights, Jessica became aware that the phone rang precisely at eleven o'clock, scarcely a second before or after. Still, she might have remained incurious had not the blondness and tall, husky build of the stranger reminded her of Robert, and she found herself inventing explanations for the man's behavior—the most plausible being that he was engaged in an illicit love affair, that each night someone rang to alert him the coast was clear and he could proceed to the rendezvous. That would explain his restlessness as he stood waiting each night for the signal, the eagerness with which he responded, and the brevity of the exchange.

It all reminded Jessica of those mysterious phonecalls in the past when there would be no one on the line if she answered. Robert insisted they must be wrong numbers, but actually, as it transpired, it had been part of that deception of which Jessica had remained ignorant until Robert came home one night and confessed he was in love with another woman. And so, gradually now, the young man on the beach provoked in Jessica an unreasonable hostility, as if indeed he were Robert and she an invisible observer of his adulterous behavior. As the nights passed, she began to enjoy a bitter amusement in imagining how the young man would react were he to arrive at the phone booth only to find it occupied at the critical moment.

With trembling fingers, she grasped the phone and pressed it to her ear, her face half turned toward the beach from where the young man always arrived. She knew she must at least *appear* to be talking to someone, and a flush spread across her face as she found certain words springing, as if automatically and unpremeditated, from her lips:

"Today I passed that little shop where you bought me the seahorse pin. I sat on the patio of that little cafe and I remembered every word you spoke, every smile, every caress. I lie in the same bed we

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shared and I remember. . . . But *why* did you change, Robert? How could you have been so cruel?"

Through a mist of real tears (she hadn't cried in weeks), she saw the figure loom up beside the booth. She saw his features—tanned, handsome—the blond hair rumpled, the eyes wide and blue, blue as Robert's, and her hand tightened on the receiver as if the stranger might open the door of the booth and wrench it from her hand.

She seemed powerless to stem the flood of words, words she had been incapable of saying to Robert's face, while beyond the glass wall the young man paced and raked his fingers through his hair and kept glancing at his watch. And even in her misery Jessica relished the look of frustration and impatience on his face. She hoped she had ruined his night's pleasure.

At sunset the following afternoon she put on her bathing suit and beach robe, slipped her feet into sandals, looked once around the room, and went out, leaving the door unlocked behind her. On the beach she stood for a moment looking out across the Gulf, tranquil as an inland lake, and a smile touched her lips. There would be no waves to hinder her; death would involve no struggle. Dropping her robe and slipping out of her sandals, she stepped into the water and resolutely began the long swim toward the indistinct line of the horizon.

She did not hear the shouts, did not see the gradual approach of the cabin cruiser. By the time it was close enough to be perceived, her senses were already deadened, her body numb, already slipping more and more often beneath the surface. Nor was she conscious of being lifted onto the boat's deck, nor of the rhythmic motion of hands upon her midsection, the pressure of lips striving to breathe life into her body.

She stared directly up into those extraordinary blue eyes but still could not speak without a feeling of tightness in her throat.

"Why didn't you—"

"Let you drown? Is that what you wanted?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Can you think of an easier way to die?"

"It's easier to go on living."

"If there's nothing to live for?"

He regarded her with a searching, clinical look. "I'd say you're too

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pretty a lady to have nothing to live for. There must be someone who cares."

She closed her eyes, her body invaded by a feeling of warmth and lassitude as the shivers subsided. "Only my father. I suppose I'm almost as important to him as his money."

"Is he the one you were talking to on the phone last night?"

"No."

"Husband? Boy friend?"

"If I told you why I was in that phone booth last night, you'd really think I'm insane."

"Try me."

She felt no more shame in telling him than she felt gratitude for his rescuing her. She felt nothing.

He smiled disbelievingly. "For a make-believe conversation it was one hell of a performance."

"Call it an exercise in catharsis. Saying things I'd wanted to say but never could. Once they were said there was nothing left to do. And was I right about you?"

"No way was I waiting for *that* kind of signal. I'm not mixed up with any broad cheating on her old man. Sorry to disappoint you."

When she asked him bluntly for an explanation of his nightly visits to that particular phone booth he replied with a grin, "Nothing romantic. Just business calls."

"Oh, sure. And that phone booth's your office."

"I live on the boat. It has no phone. You might say I'm an area representative for a big corporation of sorts. I was told to come down here and wait for instructions. But let's talk about you. You're wearing a wedding ring. Marital problems, is that what drove you over the edge?"

"It doesn't matter any more."

"What if your husband comes looking for you and finds you've pulled a stunt like this? Pretty rough on the guy."

She struggled to sit up. "The only reason he'd come looking for me is if my father forced him to—or bribed him. Daddy's a very powerful man. Even ruthless, some people would say." And Robert, she had to admit, was spineless enough to do whatever Daddy ordered—especially if he were paid to do it. But no, she was sure Daddy was far too angry at Robert to try to bribe him into a reconciliation. Daddy's rage had been close to murderous when he'd learned how Robert had deceived her. His last words to her before she had fled here were: "Don't worry, honey. And don't waste your tears on him.

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Nobody hurts my baby and gets away with it. Robert will get what's coming to him, one way or another."

Now the young man helped her to her feet. "Come on into the cabin. You need rest."

He left a note by the bed when she still hadn't awakened by ten-thirty that night. He rowed the dinghy to shore and was waiting by the phone when it rang.

The voice was harshly reproving. "Where the hell were you last night?"

"Here. Some mouthy broad was tying up the line."

"Okay, the word's come through from Boston. The mark is on his way. He'll arrive in Tampa at midnight. Eastern flight 302. Our client wants it to look like another robbery. Make sure it happens before the guy makes contact with the person he's coming down there to meet. And, Eric, make it a clean one."

"Don't I always?"

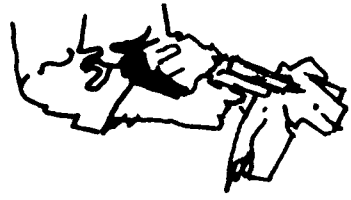
Jessica was awake when he got back to the boat shortly before one. "Still with us?" he said lightly.

"It seemed impolite to jump overboard without saying goodbye."

"I'll brew some coffee and we'll talk. I don't know anything about you except your first name." He extended his hand. "Mine's Eric."

His grip was strong and warm and she felt reluctant to release his hand, to break the connection. She hadn't noticed earlier the gold watch on his wrist and she felt a pang of sadness. It looked identical to the one she had given Robert on their first wedding anniversary. Absolutely identical, even to the little rubies on its face. She looked into Eric's eyes. Yes, she was right, his eyes were the same shade of blue. Only warmer, kinder, not cruel like Robert's.

"Thank you," she said. "Coffee would taste good."



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a *NEW* Captain Sunset story by

JAMES POWELL

"Where's your gun, son?" Scotland asked.

"The zing-a-do's yesterday's news, sir," said the boy. "In inventing, you learn to pick yourself up and move on to the next brainstorm. Ecology's the bright-ticket item today. Something that'll purify the world's air and water or convert toxic waste into high-octane gasoline will win a science fair every time." He looked around to make sure there wasn't another kid in the room. "Next year I'm going with a biodegradable hockey puck . . ."

THE MAD SCIENTIST, J.G.

by JAMES POWELL

The four bright, spanking-new mini-vans tied together with a red-crepe-paper ribbon had all the makings of a media event. The office workers eating lunch on the plaza benches or around the lip of the City Hall fountain had all been down this road before. So had the pushcart vendors, from the trendy Man of a Thousand Tofus to the veteran Wally the Dog and Kraut King. Still, for nothing better to do they watched the Roving Eye newspeople unload their television camera and the photographer from *The Clarion* fuss with his light-meter. But when Councilman-at Large Conrad Dingle and his sidekick, Deputy Police Chief Warren Smeltzer, came down the City Hall steps to where a microphone had been set up, they were greeted with a chorus of groans.

Beaming at the departing backs of the fast eaters, Dingle said, "Folks, may I get things rolling here today by telling you a little story? A year ago after beaucoup soul-searching and prayer, I decided to throw my hat into the ring and run for mayor. And like always, the first person I told was my dear old silver-haired mother,

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God bless her. Ninety years old but still sharp as a tack. 'Conrad, my boy,' she said to me, 'If you're going to be mayor, be a mayor for *all* the people. Do something for the old people, too, " Dingle winked at the media. " 'Hey, Mom,' I said, 'didn't I give you that wonderful cashmere shawl for Christmas?'

"But seriously, folks, as soon as she said those words I knew Mom was right. These vans you see before you are the first fruits of my labors in city council on behalf of the elderly. And there will be more where that came from when you elect me mayor. These little honeys are kneelers and wheelchair-accessible. We're talking state-of-the-art transportation for the walking-impaired. They will carry our housebound elderly from their own front door to the shopping and entertainment centers of our fair city and back again. And by the way, I'm glad to see in our midst some ladies from the Gray Berets, that fine organization which, along with the Captain Sunset person, has shown us all how the elderly can assist our fine police force. Isn't that true, Warren?"

The big man at Dingle's side gave a grudging nod. Captain Sunset had stolen too many headlines from Smeltzer for the Deputy Chief to spare more. When Dingle flourished a large pair of shears and headed for the beribboned minibuses, Smeltzer, who hoped to succeed him as councilman-at-large, strode close behind to keep in the frame of the tracking TV camera.

Posing in mid-snip for the still photographers, Dingle announced, "I now declare this bus service for the elderly disabled to be well and truly open!"

"And I declare you to be well and truly a thief, Councilman Dingle!" boomed a voice over the loudspeaker system. A silver-haired man in a mask had taken Dingle's place at the microphone. He wore plus-fours, argyle socks, a black somebrero with little balls around the rim, a sweater with the emblem of an hourglass pierced by a lightning bolt knitted into the chest, and he carried a cane with a pennant bearing the same device.

"Warren," muttered Dingle urgently, "you going to let Captain Sunset crash my media event?"

Smeltzer signaled a patrolman, who started toward the steps. But the Gray Beret women were a barricade of scowls above and sensible, shin-threatening shoes below.

"Dingle," continued Captain Sunset, "on your recommendation the city purchased these vehicles through Dacron Motors. Just who is Dacron Motors? To answer that question Captain Sunset had to

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conquer a paper labyrinth of dummy corporations and Caribbean holding companies that would have daunted a lesser hero. But it is a long trail that has no ending. Dacron Motors is the sole property of Elgind Associates, whose officers of record are Conrad Dingle's son-in-law and two of his maternal aunts."

"Warren," moaned Dingle. But Smeltzer made no move to silence Captain Sunset. He knew you didn't get elected to public office by manhandling the darling of the dotards on live television.

Captain Sunset waved a sheaf of papers and said, "This information has been placed in the hands of the district attorney. And now my charming assistants, the Sunsetettes, will distribute copies to the media."

As the television camera trundled in on the sagging Dingle, Smeltzer lay a hand on his arm in such a way that the councilman-at-large might think he was being comforted and the television viewers that he was being arrested.

Captain Sunset started down the steps, waving to the crowd and flashing his famous white smile. But an elderly man shouted, "Hey, Captain, isn't Dingle here small potatoes? I mean, what about this young-mad-scientist character?" And somebody else called, "Yeah, what about the Children's Crusade?"

"My friends," answered the champion of the elderly, "trust Captain Sunset. Captain Sunset has everything under control. Don't listen to rumors and keep close to your televisions for further bulletins." With a final wave and a smile, Captain Sunset started off in the direction of Wally the Dog and Kraut King's pushcart.

But a smirking young lout lounging against a light standard called after him, "Hey, Sunset, where's Butch Cassidy? Or couldn't she make it?"

Captain Sunset turned, raised his cane, and sighted down the wood. "Bang!" he said contemptuously, as if a make-believe rifle was all he needed to dispose of so pitiful an adversary. At that precise moment, a passing Gray Beret distributing the Dingle evidence kicked the cheeky young man's feet out from under him. Thus was born the legend that the champion of the elderly was armed with a cane-gun, whose magic bullets never missed their mark or left a trace.

In the next instant a smoke bomb went off, and Captain Sunset vanished into the red, white, and blue cloud.

Alex Scotland, whose forty years as a theatrical agent had qual-

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ified him to run Captain Sunset operations for the Gray Berets, turned off the news but continued to stare at the blank screen while he scratched a wrinkled cheek thoughtfully. It had been Dingle's grey-haired old mother, God bless her, who had set them onto him after he'd made a present of her favorite cashmere shawl to "that painted floozy he calls his third wife." And a dozen retired accountants had burned the midnight oil for a week to make the connection between Dacron Motors and Elgind Associates. Scotland thought the vanishing act had looked particularly good. Wally the Dog and Kraut King got the cover back on the manhole under his pushcart before the smoke cleared, and Captain Sunset had been whisked away to safety by Rex Lubish, retired city engineer, who knew every underground sewer and crawl space beneath the streets and also played a fine organ come Gray Beret sing-along time. However, if Clarence Dexter Huntington the Third didn't stick to the script, they were going to have to find themselves a new Captain Sunset. That "Sunsetettes" ad lib was godawful.

Turning back to the business at hand, Scotland looked across the desk to the old guy with the white crewcut and black string tie. "Sorry about the interruption, Mr. Keefer, but I had to see that," he said. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes." Remembering, he regretted once more than Fernandez, the real brains behind Captain Sunset, was off sick. Scotland corrugated his well lined brow for a moment. "Okay, I give up," he said. "You tell me. Why *is* a fried giraffe sandwich, hold the mayo, like a community of monks walking around on stilts?"

Hugh W. Keefer lay a bony hand on each of his bony knees and leaned forward. "They're both tall orders," he said quietly. He ended the long, silent moment that followed by adding, "As I said, coming up with brain teasers like that is my hobby. But it takes two to tango." His eyes turned sad. "And all my friends and loved ones are departed."

"They up and left town on you, did they, Mr. Keefer? That doesn't surprise me much."

"That's why I favor the Downtown Shopping Mall," said Keefer. "The old guys and girls recuperating from whatever go there to get their exercise, it being under roof and easy walking and a safer place than most. A guy who's just had a heart attack will think twice before he cuts and runs when I arrive on the scene. I sit down beside them on a bench, see. Then all of a sudden I laugh out loud and slap my knee so they have to ask, 'What's so funny?' That's when I hit

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them with my latest puzzler. But this guy must have been down that road before because he kind of groaned and raised his newspaper. Just then this kid, a mean-looking little pitcher with big ears, comes trotting up the aisle."

"How old?"

"Say ten–eleven," said Keefer. "And as he goes by, he points this weird handgun with a barrel coiled like a spring at my neighbor's newspaper and goes 'zing-zing-zing!' A couple of minutes later I gave the guy the laugh-and-slap again. No response. So I shake his arm and say, 'Hey, you want to know what's so funny?' Believe me, Mr. Scotland, if you aren't persistent people will break your heart. But all the guy did was slump over dead."

Scotland and Keefer exchanged sad, shruglike glances. Death was a fact of life. "The mall security office was right there in the aisle," continued Keefer. "One of their people tried mouth-to-mouth, then he called an ambulance. They said there wasn't a mark on the body. The next morning in the cafeteria I read where the coroner said how the guy's pacemaker kicked up on him. Hey, I almost choked on my oatmeal cookie. Filling the people at my table in on the whole business, I said, 'Suppose, just suppose, that angry kid was an inventor whose brainchild was this gun that could screw up pacemakers?' Well, they all rushed off kind of wild-eyed. But here's life for you. A couple of days later when my 'suppose' worked it's way back to me, my angry young inventor had become a Mad Scientist, J.G., leading an army of kids carrying a whole arsenal of rough-on-oldster weapons, like a gizmo to speed up your pacemaker until you jitterbugged yourself to death or one to turn your bones to glass or to pop your dentures out of your mouth and make them chase you down the street snapping at your heels."

Keefer shook his head in disbelief. "Then suddenly this morning a little corker named Miss Iris LaBarge comes to my door," he said, "and says she and her people had tracked me down as the guy who'd started the whole damn story. She calls me a first-class rumor-monger and a discredit to my age group. I told her I'd only said 'Suppose,' but she grabbed a fistful of my shirt under my chin and said—"—here Keefer forced his voice into a deep bay "—'*Suppose* I just kick you into next week, Mr. Keefer. Or *suppose* you just hustle your hotcakes down to see Mr. Scotland at the Community Center.' So here I am, Mr. Scotland. Wouldn't you be?"

Scotland gave him no argument. If people came to resemble their pets, Iris LaBarge, who headed up Gray Beret Rumor Control, must

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have kept bulldogs. Even Leon Flacker, the butcher, who chaired their board of directors weighed his words with LaBarge in earshot, for she candled them one by one in her quest for rumor—by which she meant opinion, hearsay, or anything not hard fact.

"Mr. Keefer, you've opened a big can of worms on us," said Scotland. "The authorities tell us we're dealing with a bunch of bum pacemakers implanted hereabouts over the last few months. The insulation on the lead wires can crack so the body fluid can seep in. They're trying to get the recipients back in for replacement. But your little story has our people panicking all over the place. Those who can pay the freight are crowding the airports and bus stations. The rest are huddling indoors with their dentures locked away in drawers. Captain Sunset wants to calm things down with a demonstration on TV to show how harmless this kid's gun really is."

Keefer's eyes grew large. "Captain Sunset? You guys actually know the Silver-Haired Champion of the Golden Agers, the Long Arm of the Long-of-Tooth?"

"Sometimes Captain Sunset lets us help with the small stuff," said Scotland. "Like finding the kid with the gun. I mean, it was two in the afternoon. You tell me, why wasn't the kid in school?"

The phone rang. Mrs. Ginty, Scotland's good right arm, passed over the receiver. "Snell," she coughed, lighting a roll-your-own.

Scotland frowned. The manager of the Downtown Shopping Mall was a master at schemes to lure Captain Sunset inside—a ribbon-cutting to kick off Golden Oldster Week or judging the Future Grandmothers of America baby contest. The Gray Berets invented their caped champion when the city refused to take the organization's crime-fighting abilities seriously. Scotland couldn't convince Snell that Captain Sunset didn't do P.R. work.

But Scotland's scolding tone on the phone quickly turned serious. When he handed the receiver back to Mrs. Ginty he said, "Snell got an extortion demand in the morning mail. Unless he pays fifty thousand by four this afternoon, the pacemaker gun will be stalking the corridors of the shopping mall again. Snell thought Captain Sunset might like to know."

"Should I wrap the package?" asked Mrs. Ginty, using their code for suiting up Clarence as Captain Sunset.

Scotland shook his head. "There'll be time for that."

"Hey, hold the phone!" said Keefer. "Why pay? Didn't you just say the gun's harmless?"

"We're talking rumor and panic here, Mr. Keefer," said Scotland.

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"We're talking old hearts. That damn gun isn't harmless until Captain Sunset shows everyone it's harmless. So we've got to get our hands on it. The police want Snell to set up the payment so they can nab the extortionist. And they've sent a car to pick up Wilson Brownie."

"Who's he?" demanded Keefer.

"He," said Scotland, "is the seventh grader the letter said was to deliver the money."

At that time of day senior citizens rode free, so they took the bus to the mall. During the short ride, Keefer lay another riddle on Scotland. "A very wise creature comes down from Mars in a spaceship and offers to cure all our earthly ills if only we sign a contract to live together in peace," he said. "But the contract has several disturbing codicils. Name the popular American novel based on this incident." Before Scotland could wish once more that Fernandez was there, they had arrived at the mall.

Snell was away arranging for the extortion money but Deputy Chief Smeltzer was waiting for them, sitting behind the manager's desk. He gave Keefer that careful once-over he saved for old guys in Scotland's company, for Smeltzer's hobby was trying to discover Captain Sunset's real identity. Then he smiled at Scotland. "What's your interest in this, gramps?"

The matter was too serious to play his cards close to the chest. Scotland explained about the kid and why the Gray Berets wanted his gun.

Smeltzer's smile ballooned. "And you think Wilson Brownie's your kid? Well, I'm way ahead of you, old timer. Yours truly was a judge at the All-School Science Fair."

Damn, damn, damn, thought Scotland. The Science Fair—that's why the kid wasn't in school. Fernandez would have picked up on that right away.

"One kid entered something he called a 'zing-a-do gun' based on those remote-control dojiggies for switching TV channels and working garage doors," said Smeltzer. "To hear the kid tell it, fire his invention down a hallway at an elevator button or a doorbell and by the time you got there so would the elevator or the occupant of the apartment. The kid claimed you could program it to do all kinds of things. But when he tried a demonstration, every sprinkler in the building went off and hearing aids in a ten-block area pulled in Radio Moscow loud and clear."

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A policeman entered, escorting a skinny boy well provided with ears and with more wrist than sleeve. He wore a Bank Street School windbreaker. Keefer looked at Scotland and nodded decisively.

"Sorry I'm late, Chief," said the policeman. "They wouldn't let him out of class without an okay from his grandmother, who wasn't home when the principal phoned. So he finally said okay." Smeltzer waved the policeman out of the room and smiled the boy into a chair, clearly intending to let him stew a while in his self-consciousness.

But Scotland asked, "Where's your gun, son?"

"The zing-a-do's yesterday's news, sir," said the boy. "In inventing, you learn to pick yourself up and move on to the next brainstorm. Ecology's the big-ticket item today. Something that'll purify the world's air and water or convert toxic waste into high-octane gasoline will win a science fair every time." He looked around to make sure there wasn't another kid in the room. "Next year I'm going with a biodegradable hockey puck."

"Sounds great, son," said Scotland. "But getting back to your gun—"

"Ronald Peters, my grandmother's boarder, took it when he skipped," said Wilson. "He wasn't a bad guy, but, you know, kind of simple. He worked out here for mall security. We got to be friends after I did his taxes for him. He was what I call a caper-head. Like reading crime comics and always after me to plan some big job for him to pull off. The Caper Game, we called it. The first thing he asked when I showed him the zing-a-do was would it do real stuff, like turn off burglar alarms or work traffic lights to make gridlock behind a getaway car. I told him no. You don't win science fairs with nutty stuff like that. But I figured he monkeyed around with the calibration when I wasn't around to see if maybe it would. So I hot-footed right out here after the Science Fair and chewed him out. The next day he skipped with the gun. Is Ronald in some kind of jam?"

Smeltzer explained about the extortion note. "You're to wait for further instructions on the corner of Church and Bank Streets, kid. There's—"

"This sounds like I'll be getting home late, sir," said Wilson, suddenly pale and worried. "I'd have to call my grandmother."

"Let's not interrupt, okay, kid?" said Smeltzer. "Now, there's this phone booth on the corner. We figure that's how you'll get your instructions. Then you lead us to Ronald, understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy.

"Then why don't you and Mr. Keefer here go wait in the outer

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office? You can call grandma from there. Mr. Scotland and I need a little chat."

Keefer brightened and got up. "You good at riddles, Wilson? How about this: I'm an edible board game where the players move around pieces of pasta, cheddar cheese, and parsnips. What's my name?"

"Sorry sir, I wasn't listening," said the boy, following him out of the room. "What's a parsnip?"

"A kind of bled carrot," said Keefer, closing the door behind them.

Smeltzer leaned forward across the desk. "Old timer, your favorite deputy police chief and mine has decided to run for mayor now that Dingle's come up lame. So when we find the kid's gun, I'll be the one who does the little TV demonstration, right? After all, who needs Captain Sunset around when they've got Mayor Smeltzer looking out for them?"

Scotland saw protest was useless. He let Smeltzer ramble on about his campaign plans until the money satchel arrived.

"Time to get the show on the road," said Smeltzer, striding out of the office and signaling Wilson to fall in at his side. Scotland and Keefer brought up the rear.

"I hung around to make sure you put in a good word for me with Miss LaBarge, Mr. Scotland," explained Keefer as they followed a short corridor out of the mall proper. "And, hey, that smart kid got my macaroni and parchesi riddle in ten seconds flat."

Out among the shoppers he added, "Well, okay, I guess I'll leave you here. You need any more help or think you've solved that riddle back there on the bus, here's my number." He handed Scotland a printed card. "The bench I work out of is right down that aisle by the telephones." As he veered off toward his bench he called after Wilson, "You know what a codicil is, don't you, son? It's like a rider, an addition to a contract."

Scotland intended to part company with Smeltzer and the boy outside the mall entrance, but there came portly, proper Fernandez, sent on by Mrs. Ginty, teetering across the parking lot on his bicycle and looking like death warmed over. His pallor and haunted eyes echoed the pea-green of his plastic cyclist's helmet. For most of his adult life before he won his battle against the bottle, Scotland had shaved just such a face every morning. Fernandez, he knew, was badly hung over. But Fernandez, he knew, didn't drink.

Fernandez had a twin brother, an Oblate missionary working up the Amazon. For years they'd been playing chess together by mail. Fernandez swore that if they happened to be working on the game

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simultaneously, he often experienced his brother's physical and mental circumstances, like his prickly heat or fear of tree snakes. Unfortunately for Fernandez, his brother often distracted himself from unpleasantness by working on the game in his head. So when Fernandez came down with seven hours of air-sickness, he knew his brother's expected recall to Rome for reassignment had come through. Yesterday, by avoiding all thought of chess, Fernandez had escaped jet lag. Today he looked like he'd been ambushed by the aftereffects of a welcoming dinner in Rome with a bit more wine than the missionary was used to.

While Smeltzer's car was being brought around, Scotland gave Fernandez a thorough rundown on the situation and explained why the Gray Berets weren't going to get the zing-a-do gun. So when the car arrived and Smeltzer invited them to come along and watch their future mayor in action, he was surprised to hear Fernandez accept. They put the bike and helmet in the trunk and got into the back with the boy. As the car drove off, Smeltzer, sitting up front with the money in his lap, turned and said, "With you two where I can keep an eye on you, I guess the Caped Curmudgeon won't be sticking his nose in, right?"

Depositing the boy and the money on the corner, they circled the block, to pull up behind a dry cleaner's delivery van parked across the street. Smeltzer's driver got into the front of the van. Smeltzer opened the rear door and motioned Scotland and Fernandez inside. "You picking up the bug in the bag, Charlie?" he demanded.

"Loud and clear, Chief," said the policeman sitting at the communications console.

"We put one of those magnetic directional bugs in the satchel under the latch," explained Smeltzer. Then he led Scotland and Fernandez to a window of one-way glass where they could watch Wilson standing on the corner next to a bus stop. "And we've got a tap on that phone booth, just in case Ronald phones in instructions. Which he won't." He turned to Fernandez. "You know why? Because the kid out there's our extortionist. He planned this whole thing. Ronald isn't smart enough to plan anything, the kid told us that himself. I guess he figures he can play a lot of video games with fifty thousand dollars. Well, as soon as he tries to give us the slip we pick him up."

"He's heading for the booth," said Scotland.

Smeltzer swung back to the window. "You asleep at the switch, Charlie?" he snapped.

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"No call in, Chief," said the policeman.

Wilson stayed inside the booth for several minutes. Then he returned to the corner. Several buses arrived and departed but the boy did not get on.

"All right, kid, so we're supposed to believe Ronald called you," said Smeltzer. "So you've got your instructions. What the hell are you waiting for?"

Fernandez pulled back his cuff and looked at his watch. "You'll see," he smiled. The puzzle at hand was clearly distracting him from his hangover. "Yes," he added, "he's a very smart boy. But there's smart what-you-know and smart who-you-know. If Ronald didn't have the brains to plan this, he sure knew someone who did."

Just then a bell sounded farther up the block. In an instant, several hundred pushing and shouting children from the Bank Street School surged out onto the sidewalk. A tributary of the flow went straight for the bus stop, swallowing up Wilson in its swirl of noise and limbs. A bus arrived and departed, leaving the sidewalk empty. "He got on with the rest," announced the policeman monitoring the bug.

As the van pulled out to follow, Smeltzer turned to Fernandez. "What'd you mean back there about Ronald and kinds of smart?"

"Scotland told me that when you mentioned the street corner by name, the boy got animated and wanted to call his grandmother," explained Fernandez. "I think he recognized one of his own Caper Game scenarios. A kidnaping. I'll bet the way Wilson planned it, they'd contact the ransom carrier using that phone booth. But his plan assumed the police would be called in. That meant a tap and a trace. The call would have to be short and sweet and leave the police none the wiser. So they hide the instructions in the booth. A phonecall would tell the ransom carrier where, like between such-and-such a page of the phonebook."

"So Ronald didn't even have to call," said Scotland. "As soon as Wilson was told the street corner, he knew where he'd find his instructions."

"And I bet he knew how they'd read," nodded Fernandez. "Something like 'Shake the cops any way you can and get the money to me at so-and-so or your grandma gets hurt."

"He's making his move!" shouted the man at the console as the bus made its fifteenth stop. Smeltzer and the driver were out of the van at the sprint.

Scotland asked, "That wasn't Wilson, right?"

Fernandez shook his head.

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"So now what?"

Fernandez shrugged hopelessly and went back to massaging his temples.

To get Fernandez' mind off the hangover, Scotland repeated Keefer's riddle about the popular American novel based on the codicils of the contract the wise Martian offered the earthlings.

"Riders of the Purple Sage," said Fernandez.

Scotland smiled. "Hey, how about an outside line?" he asked the policeman at the console.

Keefer answered on the first ring. "Good for you!" he shouted. "Though Wilson beat you by a mile—he called five minutes ago!"

"From where?" demanded Scotland urgently.

"Don't ask me!" said Keefer. "But I heard an airplane engine and seagulls in the background!"

Scotland conferred with Fernandez for a minute and then made another call to Mrs. Ginty at the Community Center. He had just handed back the receiver when Smelzer returned, red-faced and scowling.

"It was some other damn kid in a Bank Street School windbreaker," Smeltzer reported. He held up the bug. "This was stuck to the bottom of his lunchbox. The little rat gave us the slip."

"Chief," said Fernandez, "we put you back on the kid's trail, you give us the gun. A deal?"

"A deal," said Smeltzer quickly.

"Well, it looks to me like Wilson has to find Ronald a safe way out of town before he gets his grandmother back," said Fernandez. "So try the seaplane marina." This downtown facility on the lakefront had recently been extended with landfill to make a runway for an hourly commuter air service to nearby cities.

"The seaplane marina and fast!" Smeltzer called up to the driver. Then he looked at his watch and said, "Would you believe that was going to be my next move: alert the airports, the bus depots, and the train station? Well, there's a good half hour before the next flight out. By God, I feel a media event coming on. Three birds with one stone. First I nail Ronald at the boarding gate with the fourth estate looking on. Second, I announce for mayor." Smeltzer looked at Fernandez. "And third, I demonstrate to the television audience how harmless the zing-a-do gun is. You see, on further reflection I've decided that it's evidence and I can't let it out of official hands."

Scotland had to look away to smile, marveling at how quickly

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Fernandez grasped things. Suspecting treachery, the brains of the Captain Sunset operation had not told all.

Halfway across town, the van ran into rush-hour traffic. During the stop-and-go, Smeltzer made calls to set up his media event, Fernandez nursed his hangover, and Scotland roughed out Captain Sunset's upcoming dialogue in his pocket notebook. At long last they reached the seaplane marina. The driveway skirted the bottom of a large parking lot and turned up along the lake front, where bright seaplanes bobbed at their moorings. It approached the terminal entrance from the rear, passing by the baggage area and the place where the limousines from the hotels and the outlying suburbs picked up and discharged their passengers. There, waiting on an outdoor bench beside a brace of telephones, was Wilson Brownie, an elderly, frail-looking woman, and a nervous young man with wary eyes and the money satchel clutched between his ankles. Scotland distracted Smeltzer by calling his attention to the Roving Eye newsteam unloading its van in the parking lot.

When they'd parked, Smeltzer strode off to usher the media people into the cafeteria by an outside door. His plan was to keep them all there until the critical moment.

Scotland and Fernandez hurried deeper into the parking lot to where two Gray Beret men were standing beside an Acme Plate Glass delivery truck parked off the main aisle. But Scotland left it to Fernandez to brief the man when he saw Mrs. Ginty's urgent wave. She'd parked her battered subcompact two aisles over. Scotland joined her and found that Clarence Dexter Huntington the Third had gotten his old bones wedged into the back seat of her tiny car while changing into his Captain Sunset costume. By tug, pry, and twist, Scotland finally worked him free. Then, with Mrs. Ginty looking the other way, Clarence finished dressing crouched down between two cars.

"Using the cane-gun bit again's a real doozy, Alex," puffed Clarence as he limbered up with kneebends. "But how about a line or two where Captain Sunset tips a grateful topper to the Gray Beret ladies who've helped so much?" Clarence, a fabled lothario, said this last part loud enough to reach Mrs. Ginty.

"For God's sake, Clarence, isn't your love life shambles enough?" whispered Scotland.

Clarence's smile was packed with memories. "Ah, Alex, if only you'd seen me in my prime. I've always had a heart big enough for

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all. But today to keep the details straight and everybody happy, I have to jot things down. Checking over your notes sure taxes the spontaneity."

Shaking his head in wonder, Scotland trotted back up to the top of the parking lot, where he collected Fernandez, who had just finished instructing the two Gray Berets on their second part in the plan. They reached the front corner of the terminal building just as the stretch limousine, a loan from the ever-generous Hollow Acres Funeral Home, pulled up alongside the bench where Wilson Brownie and his party sat. The hand-printed sign in the windshield said "Fairhaven," the name of a prosperous residential community in outermost suburbia. Wilson had to figure Smeltzer would cover the airports. He hadn't come there to escape by air. The Fairhaven limousine would take them well beyond any police cordon. After that Ronald could go where he liked.

Leon Flacker, the Gray Beret chairman of the board, had closed down his butcher shop to be at the kill. Now, dressed in chauffeur's livery, he came around and opened the limousine's middle door. "Last call for Fairhaven!" he shouted and hurried back to his place behind the wheel. They had counted on Ronald not noticing that the limousine was early and, though almost full, did not discharge any passengers. In fact, he didn't even notice that they'd forgotten to remove the purple funeral flags from the front fenders.

Ronald herded his two companions into the limousine. But when he tried to slide in after them, a Gray Beret woman sitting in the back seat pulled the door shut and punched down the lock button. Immediately, the limousine squealed backward in an arc to block the driveway. Ronald drew the zing-a-do gun from his jacket pocket and started toward it. Then he stopped, hefted the satchel thoughtfully, and, as if deciding to take the money and run, he turned and sprinted toward the front of the terminal and the exit to the street.

Yes, he noticed the two old guys standing at the corner of the building ahead of him. Yes, he saw one of them drop a paper bag into a large trash can at his side and wondered why they both stepped around the corner with their hands over their ears. He was almost even with the trash can when the loud explosion came, stopping him dead in his tracks. Suddenly every head had turned in his direction. The cafeteria windows filled with faces and cameras. Heads peered around corners and out of doorways. To escape all the eyes, Ronald fled down the main aisle of the parking lot, running wildly, until Captain Sunset leaped out from beneath two cars and into his path.

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"Ronald Peters," the man in the costume announced, "you and those extorted bucks stop here and so does this shameful campaign to terrorize your elders." Captain Sunset flourished his cane and rapped Ronald on the chest with it. "Let those who prey on Captain Sunset's constituency know they have a wolf by the ears!"

Suddenly Ronald came back to life and charged. But Captain Sunset was as quick on his feet as Clarence the tango dancer and he stepped aside adroitly. Ronald plunged past him for three full strides before plowing headlong into the large pane of plate glass the two Gray Berets had earlier lugged across the aisle. The dazed young man fell back onto the macadam and sat shaking his head. Here Captain Sunset was supposed to reach down and recover the zing-a-do gun. But favoring his left profile as he did, he changed position and struck a fresh pose when he saw the television camera appear outside the terminal. This gave Ronald time to scoop up gun and satchel and dash back up toward the top of the parking lot where a large crowd had now gathered.

Captain Sunset sank down on one knee. "Stop or I'll shoot!" he shouted, sighting down his cane. "Bang!" shouted Captain Sunset when the fugitive did not stop, signaling the two Gray Berets crouched down behind cars on either side of the aisle to draw tight the wire they held between them.

Ronald hit the ground like a ton of bricks. The gun flew out of his hand and arced into the air. The crowd reached for it. Scotland and Fernandez reached for it. But it came down right into the arms of Deputy Chief Smeltzer, who arrived late because he had been afraid the explosion was a diversionary tactic to draw the police away from the boarding gate.

Sizing up the situation at once, Smeltzer dragged Ronald to his feet by the scruff of the neck and turned him to face the media. "Ronald Peters, I arrest you for extortion and kidnaping," he announced. Then, handing the young man and the satchel over to his uniformed subordinates, he smiled at the television camera and displayed the zing-a-do gun.

"Folks," he said, "because of this so-called weapon, many of our old-timers out there have been afraid to walk the streets of our fair city. Now it'll be my distinct pleasure to demonstrate to one and all how harmless it really is. And remember, what Deputy Chief Smeltzer does here today to defend our elderly will go double in spades for Mayor Smeltzer." With a playful wink, he spun the gun by the trigger guard and aimed it at the television camera. When

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he pulled the trigger, every viewer's television set began a slow plod around the dial that would not end short of a service call and city-wide every automatic garage door kept going up and down in three-quarter time until the works were attacked with a hammer, all traffic lights froze on red, and ghetto blasters switched to Respighi to a man.

As the Captain Sunset team walked Wilson and his grandmother home through the Smeltzer gridlock, Scotland asked, "How come Ronald let you make that phone call, son?"

"Ronald was getting pretty jittery there, waiting for the limo, sir," said Wilson. "And since I'd figured out Mr. Keefer's riddle, I walked him through it to take his mind off things. Well, it turned out Ronald was the mall security guy who gave mouth-to-mouth to the bum-pacemaker guy. And Mr. Keefer'd stumped him good on the fried-giraffe-sandwich riddle while they were waiting for the ambulance. So when I figured out that one for him he was all hot to call Keefer, figuring maybe there was a prize or something."

"Son," said Scotland, "you're going to make a hell of a Gray Beret one of these days. Glad to have you in the pipeline."

They were crossing a viaduct over eight lanes of stalled express-way traffic. "When they find out who to thank," said Clarence, "it'll be *sic transit gloria* Smeltzer."

"Well, he's got my vote," laughed Fernandez. "When he pulled the trigger back there, it cured my hangover like that. The hair of the dog that bit my brother."

Wilson had gotten his gun back after the media event. He pulled it out now and looked at it. "Sir, nobody wins science fairs with hangover cures," he said and tossed the gun over the parapet.

Scotland made a grab and missed. "Ah, son," he said sadly, watching the crazy thing drop to the pavement far below, "at my school of hard knocks that honey would have won you a Nobel Prize."

"Q"

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Elinor felt unreal. She didn't know the perfume was in her purse until the store detective stopped her with it . . .

THE KEY TO ALBERT'S CLOSET

by GERMAINE ROQUEVERT

The store detective's touch on Elinor's arm was gentle as he led her back through Elmeer's Department Store, as though he were escorting her to lunch in the Shoppers Rendezvous.

Not like Albert's touch.

Albert's touch left bruises on her arm. And he wasn't above shoving and face-slapping nowadays. But Albert had had a sadistic streak as long as she could remember.

In the early days of their marriage, he would grab her by the arm and lead her playfully (laughing, slyly squeezing—not too much but just enough so she'd feel it) to a speck of dust she'd missed on the arm of a chair, or on a bedpost. And during the early years, when he strapped James's little legs with his belt, he justified himself by calling his cries a tempest-in-a-teacup.

It galled her now to think of the times she resorted to guile to ward off nasty welts and bruises on James's little thighs and buttocks. She should have sneaked up from behind and whacked Albert with the first thing she could get her hands on.

But why was she thinking about all that now?

There was a crowd waiting for the elevator. The detective let her arm go. He seemed to realize she would not try to get away.

How could she do such a thing? Forgetting where she put things was getting to be a daily occurrence but why put something in her purse that didn't belong to her? What was she *thinking* about when she put the perfume in her purse? Was she thinking about the dead mouse in the spare-room closet where Albert kept his golf clubs and what he called his private papers under lock and key?

It hadn't been easy all these years having to ask for the key every

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time she wanted to clean that closet, and having to stand aside like a child while Albert removed certain boxes she wasn't privy to.

But none of that mattered now.

Now she would have to tell Albert she was charged with shoplifting and she didn't even know the perfume was in her purse until the store detective stopped her outside the store.

The elevator stopped. When the door slid open, the detective caught her arm gently and guided her through.

Elinor stood before the manager's desk—awed, like an artless child accused of cheating in class. Although she and the store detective stood side by side, his voice sounded hardly within earshot to her dazed brain.

She was all nerves. That's all she'd been ever since she married Albert over forty years ago, a bundle of nerves—a walking, talking parody of the human race.

"I didn't know the perfume was in my purse," she muttered.

Now—at this moment—she felt unreal. As unreal as she felt more than once, when, to keep mind and body together, she would dream up an audacious scenario: she would sneak up from behind when Albert was dozing in his LaZy Boy recliner in front of the TV and come down on his head with his own hammer with all the force of her 165 pounds. (The hammer would be hidden in the ten-inch pocket of a housecoat she had herself made, ostensibly to hold her garden trowel.)

But as the scenario unfolded, it would take off on its own. Just as she was about to bring the hammer down, he'd raise himself. It didn't matter what he'd get up for—to get a snack from the kitchen or to change the television channel—but get up he would every time. And the ending never varied. She would return the hammer to the imaginary pocket of the imaginary housecoat and hurry away, keeping her back to him, muttering something about there being nothing good on TV tonight.

"—first offense."

First offense. The words registered. The manager's voice brought her back. The store detective was wiping her face with a wet handkerchief. She remembered hands supporting her, the feel of a chair at the back of her knees, a voice urging her to sit. The manager was still sitting behind his desk.

She said it again, a little louder this time.

"I didn't know the perfume was in my purse."

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"I'm inclined to believe you—as is Mr. Norton, I'm sure," the manager said, nodding toward the store detective.

It was kind of the manager to order a cab and charge it to the store. True, she did sign a release, but that was understandable. Mr. Norton was thoughtful, too, waiting with her for the cab, helping her in and seeing that she was comfortably seated before closing the door behind her.

A scene framed by the cab window caught her eye. A young mother—at least she assumed it was the mother—with legs as long as a thoroughbred filly's, was taking giant steps along the sidewalk, clutching the hand of a small child. The child was bawling, dangling, his toes tipping the pavement, his heels coming down often enough to make three or four steps to her one. Thoughtless cruelty.

Not like Albert's conniving cruelties.

Only yesterday afternoon— Or was it the day before yesterday? No matter. She never could remember dates and now the days seemed to run into one another. All bad days—like recurring nightmares.

Anyway, in a paroxysm of anger, she felt an uncontrollable desire to mash Albert's face in, to stand up to him face-to-face, wielding one of his precious irons, bashing and bashing—and laughing, pretending it was play, the way he did. This was after Albert had jabbed at the forearm of James's youngest—his own grandchild—with the beak-long fingernail of his right forefinger again and again, until Jimmy's arm was tinged pink. (Apologies and explanations were useless when Martha came for Jimmy. Martha had left in a huff, murmuring something about sadism and lack of responsibility.)

That night she had stood in the doorway and contemplated Albert's naked scalp inches below the top of the LaZyBoy, so smooth and shiny in the beam of the floor lamp. Like snake skin.

Elinor gazed out the cab window and tugged at the middle finger of her right hand. When the knuckle cracked, she jerked the remaining fingers viciously, cracking and cracking.

It offended her, that bone-hard cranium. Standing in the doorway that night, it had come to her that her abhorrence for her husband was no less intense than the revulsion she felt at the sight of a snake. And it was then that her years of pent-up anger joined forces with her revulsion to send the blood rushing to her face. Overcome by dizziness, she had braced herself against the door frame. Minutes seemed like hours as she sagged in the doorway like a propped-up

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rag doll. When the dizziness passed, she'd made her way to her bedroom, bone-tired. She remembered now she'd felt as if she'd been grappling with the black-hooded wrestler Albert was watching on TV.

The cab driver's furtive glance over his shoulder caught her eye. Was she thinking out loud? Did he think she had spoken to him?

The cab was drawing up to the curb. She took a deep breath and released it with a sigh of relief. She wouldn't have to tell Albert about her brush with the law.

When she opened the front door, she remembered the mouse. She pictured its horrid little body caught in the trap. Was its head crushed under the spring, or was it pinned by the neck? Or was its paw pinned? No, not the paw. For then the mouse would be alive and there would be no odor.

She should have left some windows open. She would open them now and turn on the attic fan. It was all she could do until Albert came home with the key.

The window in the spare room was stuck. She pounded the sash and shoved up, pounded and shoved. Her efforts were futile. She turned away from the window and started out of the room. That's when she saw it.

The key. It was in the closet door. It wasn't like Albert to forget it. Now she could confirm her suspicions—she could open the door and find the extra bankbook she was sure he had, an account in his name only.

She could. If it weren't for the mouse.

But she didn't have to look at the mouse, not really.

Hesitantly, she opened the closet door.

The mouse was larger than any she'd ever imagined! Its ridiculously hairless head was blood-dappled, shining wetly like snake skin.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

"Would you mind if we called at your home and had a look at Sandra's room, Mr. McAuley?" King asked. "There might be something there that would point us in the right direction."

"Of course, sir. But don't you think she was just set on?"

King shook his head. "In the middle of the day in the middle of the city and her handbag not taken from her? I don't think so, Mr. McAuley. I think she knew her attacker."

His second short police procedural set in heavily atmospheric Glasgow, written especially, absorbingly, for you by Glaswegian Peter Turnbull . . .

McNAUGHT'S OBSESSION

by PETER TURNBULL

It was one of those days in which the city of Glasgow looked her worst. It was raining, and as most often in the West of Scotland when it rains, as is said, it doesn't just rain, it rains.

It was dusk, about 4:00 P.M. in the onset of winter, coming on Christmas, close as Donoghue could later remember to the shortest day of the year, and the rain—as the lady in the shop, which was bedecked with decorations and imitation holly, remarked—was coming down like stair rods. Donoghue nodded in agreement as he placed the box of matches deep inside the layers of his clothing and stepped out into the bustle of Hope Street.

He screwed his trilby round tight on his head and thought that the shop assistant's description was apt. The rain fell so hard that to him it did not seem like individual droplets of water but rather like a million needlelike jets driving down into the city. It hissed

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as it fell and drummed as it bounced off the pavement. The water ran in torrents down the gutters and eventually flooded near Central Station when the drains there could no longer cope. The down pipes at the sides of the buildings collected water from the slates and delivered it forcefully onto the pavements, which ran an inch deep in the grimy fluid. One such pipe was fractured at waist height and the jet of water shot out at ninety degrees across the pavement. People just walked through it; it couldn't get any wetter.

Donoghue joined the stream of people, all walking with their heads down and shoulders hunched, none talking. He stopped at the pedestrian crossing, pressed the button, and eventually the cars stopped. Each vehicle's headlights were burning and on each the windscreen wipers seemed to be at full speed yet doing no more than moving rapidly backward and forward across a sheet of water—it was futile to hope they could clear the screens.

Donoghue turned down the far side of Hope Street and walked to where a uniformed police officer was standing at the entrance to an alley. The man stood with his shoulders back and his head up. He was wearing a cap and a cape and so far as he was concerned it could rain all it liked. He saluted as Donoghue strode past him into the alley.

It was in the alley that the woman had been murdered.

In the alley, visibility was better. There were no cars' headlights or taillights, no shop windows brilliantly lit, no tall yellow street lamps, nothing to dazzle in the dullness, just the fading remnants of the day's natural light, which was quite sufficient for Donoghue to make out the tarpaulin that had been erected on poles over the body to keep off as much rain as was possible. He could make out the tall silver-haired pathologist, Dr. Reynolds, who was kneeling and peering under the tarpaulin, dictating notes his assistant took down—with some difficulty, thought Donoghue, scribbling as he was with a sheet of cellophane clipped over his notepad, covering the paper.

Standing just to one side and a little behind Dr. Reynolds was Dr. Chan, a small bespectacled Chinese who was duty police surgeon, the first medical man on the scene and who had pronounced the woman dead. Donoghue had not met Dr. Chan before and found him to be modest, helpful, and professional. It was, he thought, a note of Dr. Chan's professionalism that he had remained at the locus of the offense, to take an interest in the pathologist's work when many

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another police surgeon would be only too anxious to get back to the shelter of the police station.

Behind the two doctors and the pathologist's assistant, Donoghue saw the well built, if not chubby Detective Constable Richard King, wavy-haired and bearded, and behind him Detective Sergeant Sussock, older, grey-haired. Sussock had shrunk back against the wall and was clutching the lapels of his collar to his throat. He seemed to be shivering. Sussock was nearly sixty years old and had a thin, deeply lined face. He had been granted an extension of service, but being a policeman on the streets of this city, Donoghue knew, was a game for a young man and he made a mental note to allocate any indoor work to Sussock.

Farther away, at the end of the alley, was a second police constable, and beyond him people on Wellington Street hurried past with bowed heads and hunched shoulders, too preoccupied to notice that here in the alley the foulest of all Scotland's common-law crimes had been committed. The act of murder in Scotland is not a contravention of statute: it is a contravention of the deeply observed common law which has never been codified, but has evolved over thousands of years. The police would catch the man or woman who did this, or the men or the women, or even the "young person," of that Donoghue was certain, and that individual—or those individuals—would be charged that on 20 December, in the vicinity of Hope Street, in the city of Glasgow at (time to be ascertained), you did (nature of attack to be ascertained, identity of deceased to be ascertained) about her person, all to her hurt and severe injury and did murder her. That, once the blanks had been filled in, would be the charge in full, no need to add "Contrary to the Murder Act 1962," as his counterparts in England, south of the wall, would have to do.

Fabian Donoghue was an Edinburian by birth and by upbringing. He preferred to live in Edinbrovian, where he and his wife made home for themselves and their two children, and did not at all mind the eighty-mile return journey to and from his place of work. He came to Glasgow when he was seventeen to study at the University and it was then that he fell in love with the city. It was the city's spirit which drew him first: he saw her as a wild, red-haired Irish woman, this city that would love you or hate you but could never be indifferent to you. Then he loved the architecture, the strong, solid stone buildings which thankfully had not been demolished to make way for concrete-and-glass monstrosities without souls.

The buildings at the center of Glasgow remain to the human scale,

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a city built by people for people to live in. Glasgow is the most Victorian city in Great Britain, if not Europe, if not the world. Donoghue in his early walks in the city noted how the streets to the west of the center had not been allowed to evolve, as in many European cities, but had been laid down in mid-Victorian times. It was an immense gesture of faith and confidence in the city, who in turn had not betrayed her benefactors. Interconnecting the streets in the grid system, again in a strict geometric pattern, was a system of lanes, always running parallel to the streets, behind the buildings. The lanes were narrow and would once have accommodated a horse and cart, but could not have allowed two such horse and carts to pass. They were cobbled in a concave manner, a culvert running the length of each alley to an open drain. The sides of the alleys were formed by the back walls of the buildings and were as such invariably high, punctuated here and there by steel doors and windows with iron bars over them.

Earlier that afternoon, a man had walked down this particular alley, taking a short cut, anxious to keep an appointment. He came across what he took to be a bundle of rags until he noticed a woman's leg, ending in a stiletto-heeled shoe. Then he saw the leg move. He was certain he saw it move. He knelt down and pulled the coat away from the woman's head as gently as he could. There was blood on the woman's hair and she moaned. He placed the coat tenderly under her head and ran into the nearest shop and screamed at the dull assistant until she allowed him to use the phone. A patrol officer attended within a matter of minutes. He believed the woman to be dead, as did the ambulance crew who arrived shortly after. The man screamed again, this time at the police officer: he screamed that he'd seen her move, he screamed that he'd heard her moan. She must now be in a coma, he had read about such things. He screamed that they had to try to save her, that they had to take her to the hospital, where modern medicine would save this very young woman, just on the threshold of life.

Eventually the police officer spoke harshly to the man and asked him to sit in the back of the patrol car. When Dr. Chan arrived and pronounced the young woman to be dead, the man wept uncontrollably.

"There's nothing else I can do here." Dr. Reynolds stood and turned to Donoghue, his longish silver hair plastered to the side of his head,

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water dripping from the end of his nose."I'll have the body removed to the Royal, unless you have an objection."

"None at all, sir." Donoghue lifted his foot out of a torrent of water and found a reasonably shallow place in which to stand. "Do you have anything for us to go on?"

"Blood in the hair at the back of her head—quite a lot, in fact. Some bruising to the throat."

"Strangulation?"

That sort of thing, said Reynolds—probably a good kicking as well, or a battering with the famous blunt instrument. "I'll let you have a report as soon as I can."

"Thank you, sir."

"I think you can eliminate the sexual motive, and also eliminate robbery. Her clothing hasn't been disturbed and her handbag was lying behind and under her, though that is more your department than it is mine."

"As though she fell on it during the attack."

"Yes, and I daresay a mugger could have run off with it very easily. She's not a large girl and I don't think she was very strong. She has drawn, thin features such as I have noticed in young women who are obsessed with their figures. I would guess she was the sort of girl who would have a can of low-calorie soft drink and a biscuit for her lunch."

Donoghue fumbled for his pipe. He didn't intend to light it in these conditions but felt that its homely taste and familiar presence would help him ruminate. "Time of death?"

"Oh, recently—very recently."

"The man who found her said he heard her moan and saw some slight movement of her leg. That was a little less than an hour ago."

"Quite possible, if not probable. There's still no sign of rigor mortis."

"Time of attack?"

Reynolds raised his left eyebrow and smiled. "That's more difficult," he said. "I would say sometime today, because with head injuries such as these it's unlikely she could have survived the drop in temperature during the night. Yet she *could* have lain here during the night. She's tucked up against the wall next to a hot-air vent, between two dustbins. She'd look like a bundle of rags in this visibility."

Donoghue nodded and lifted the lids of the dustbins. They were empty, indicating, he thought, that there had been a refuse collection

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that morning. It was easily enough verified, but it leant immediate support to the pathologist's supposition that the deceased had been attacked earlier in the day but not before the refuse had been collected.

"When do you propose to start the postmortem?" Donoghue asked as he noticed King rifling the deceased's handbag. "I wonder if it might not be politic to wait until she has been identified."

"Of course." Reynolds nodded. "I'll wait for you to notify me of a request to begin the P.M. How long do you think it will be before you make the identification?" Donoghue glanced at King, who was holding a bank passbook, a transcard, and a letter. "Less than an hour," he said.

It was part of the job which never got any easier, a sequence of events that had been acted out many, many times in the past and would most certainly take place many, many times in the future. It wasn't by any means the first time Police Constable Piper had been obliged to undertake the duty and he knew it wouldn't be the last. The knock on the door, the look of worry in the householder's eyes, the draining of color, the hand going up to the middle of the chest, all in the first few seconds of answering the door in a household not used to visits by the police. Then the same phrase, in this case to a Mr. McAuley, "I'm afraid I have some bad news," and the immediate assumption of the worst: "It's Sandra, isn't it? Something's happened to Sandra."

The nodding of the head, "Yes, I'm sorry," the calling for the spouse, "Olive, Olive, it's the police, it's Sandra, something's happened," and the bustling running of Olive McAuley, tears already streaming down her cheeks. Then later the final distraught collapse as the drawer is opened and the sheet is parted and the last vestige of hope is removed. It never, ever got easier.

Sandra McAuley had lived with her parents in Haghill. "She wasn't like the other girls around Haghill, you know, sir. It's not easy to rise above it all, it's not so easy—you know Haghill, sir. There's decent folk there, but the neds set the cars alight on Saturday nights and girls leave school at sixteen—they're mothers at seventeen and then they start looking for husbands. The boys don't bother looking for work because there isn't any. They live for the day the unemployment check arrives and then blow it all on one massive bender, which is their alcohol intake for the week. Sandra

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sort of kept herself decent, you know. She'd talk and pass the time of day, but she got out and got a job. She had a boy friend once, and once she went to Inverness for a few days. She was nineteen years old and our only one."

King took a packet of cigarettes from his jacket and offered them to the man and the woman. The man said, "Thank you, sir."

"Mr. King will do," said King, who hated being called "sir" by men old enough to be his father.

Mrs. McAuley just shook her head at the offered cigarette. She had long since stopped crying, and by the time King arrived at the mortuary to relieve Piper she sat quietly, withdrawn, shocked, distant, sometimes trembling a little.

"Where did Sandra work, Mr. McAuley?" King struck a match and extended it toward the man.

"In a travel agent's." Mr. McAuley leant forward and puffed the cigarette alight. "She liked the work."

"Any particular friends?"

The man shook his head. He was still hearing his daughter's voice. He'd be going home soon—he'd sit in his chair, waiting for her to come home, the click click click of her shoes as she ran the last few steps to the door, the shaking of the umbrella before she shut the door behind her, her "I'm home." "No, no particular friends, sir."

Sir. The word jarred against King's ears. "Would you mind if we called at your home and had a look at Sandra's room, Mr. McAuley? There might be something there that would point us in the right direction."

"Of course, sir. But don't you think she was just set on?"

King shook his head. "In the middle of the day in the middle of the city and her handbag not taken from her? I don't think so, Mr. McAuley, I think she knew her attacker."

Then the woman spoke for the first time. "Do they have to do that to her, cut her up?"

King nodded gently. "Yes, Mrs. McAuley, I'm afraid they do."

She began to wail again.

"Strangulation complicated by blows to the head and by exposure," said Reynolds, standing at the desk, telephone in hand, reading from his notes. "There were wounds to the head in which grit and mortar were embedded, so I would guess that the blunt instrument I mentioned earlier was in fact the wall she was found at the foot of."

Donoghue, in his office, held his own phone with one hand and

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scribbled on his notepad with the other. "You're saying her head was intentionally bounced off the wall a couple of times?"

"Yes, but a wee bit more often then twice. Anything up to a dozen times," said Reynolds. "Her skull at the back looks like an expanse of crazy paving. The bruising on the neck, where she was strangled, indicates a large hand—two large hands, that is. There's a wide spread between thumb and index finger. There's also bruising under the chin."

"She was lifted up by her neck?"

"Yes. She wasn't a big girl, less than a hundred pounds, but it would still take a fair degree of strength to keep her off her feet while her head was being hit against the wall. I think the attacker is a large, well built man, probably taller than she is, but not necessarily so."

Donoghue continued to scribble.

"Another bit of information," said Reynolds, "is that she went down fighting, brave lassie. She clawed his face, quite deeply I would guess. There's blood and skin tissue under each fingernail—he's AB positive and the skin tissue is definitely male and Caucasian. But that probably doesn't help you so much as the likelihood that he's badly scratched about the face."

"Could you pin down the time of the attack, sir?"

"No, I'm sorry—not with any more accuracy than I guessed earlier today when we spoke at the locus of the offense."

"I see."

"The other point I would mention is that I don't think this was a murder attempt, even though that is how it ended up."

"No?"

"I'd guess, going by the bruising to her throat, that her attacker was strong enough to crush her thorax—he could easily have strangled her if he had set out to kill her—but the injuries are more consistent with the attacker losing self-control and battering her head off the wall in a fit of temper. With his hands round her neck, she wouldn't have been able to scream for assistance. She lost consciousness and was unable to withstand the heat loss due to saturation and the drop in temperature as dusk fell. She eventually died of hypothermia. The brain damage was massive, though, and if she *had* been found earlier, in time to save the heat loss, she would have been little more than a vegetable for the rest of her life. I'll have my report typed up and sent to you by courier, but what I have told you just now is the nuts and bolts of my findings."

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Donoghue thanked him, put the phone down, and reached for his pipe and his tobacco, a mix he had specially made for him by a tobacconist—a Dutch base with a twist of dark shag to give depth of flavor and to slow the burning rate. He was filling his pipe when the phone rang again. A female voice said, "Criminal records here, sir. We have no trace of Sandra McAuley, nineteen years of the given address."

"Nice girl," said the man who seemed to PC Malcolm Montgomerie to be overacting the sudden-shock-and-the-terrible-tragedy bit, a bit too father-figure-full-of-concern.

Montgomerie thought that Fraser Nicol, owner and manager of Clipper Travel on West Regent Street, with his minute moustache, very short hair, yellow cravat and matching handkerchief sticking out of his blazer pocket, must be some petty tyrant to have to work for. Montgomerie was also irritated by Nicol's desktop, for even now at the close of the working day nothing was on it that should not be on it, and nothing that was on it was out of place. The ruler lay parallel to the side of the desk and the pens and pencils lay parallel to the ruler. Montgomerie liked people whose desks were a mess, whose desktops were a continual shifting sound of papers and documents which invariably spilled over into piles on the floor—people who kept such desks he thought were human beings.

As Montgomerie entered Clipper Travel, he noticed that all the assistants were females dressed in the same uniform of scarlet skirt, white shirt, scarlet tie, and scarlet cap—not at all necessary in a travel agent's, where smart but casual would do. Even less necessary was that one of the girls should shoot up from her seat and snap to attention as Montgomerie approached her. Montgomerie had immediately formed an impression of the sort of mind that ran Clipper Travel and his meeting with Fraser Nicol did not change that impression.

"She was good at her job—efficient, courteous, well liked by the others. A very nice girl." Nicol shook his head. "The pity of it all. It was just half an hour ago that the police phoned and told us to expect you, and we're still in a state of shock."

The hypocrisy of it, thought Montgomerie. "Did she say where she was going when she left the office at lunchtime?"

Fraser Nicol shook his head. "She went out for an early lunch break and didn't return. She would have left about midday."

"I see." Montgomerie opened his notebook and began to scribble

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in it. He was a tall, well built cop who wore a down-turned moustache and always dressed as well as his salary would permit. "Did she say anything about her private life? Did she have a man friend that you know of?"

"She didn't say anything to me. You can ask the girls."

"I intend to," said Montgomerie.

Nicol glared at him.

In the reception at Clipper Travel, Nicol's assistants gathered round Montgomerie, eager to help—and, he knew, eager to be close to him, as girls and women had wished to be close to him, to be seen with him, since he was seventeen. And from the age of seventeen, he had not been slow to exploit the abundance of good fortune that nature and birth had heaped on him.

He sat in a chair by a desk, the girls jostled round, gazing at him with wide eyes. He opened his notebook and thought it fortunate that the travel agency wasn't busy—surprising since such shops usually do brisk trade in bad weather, even if people just dove in out of the rain to grab armfuls of brochures with pictures of sunny places.

"She was worried," said one girl, pleasant of face above the severe uniform. She reminded Montgomerie of one of his lady friends who had worked in a bar the gimmick of which was that the bar girls wore skimpy clothes, basically lingerie and high heels. He was amused when his friend told him that during their coffee breaks the girls sat together in the back room wearing their overcoats.

"How so?" he asked the girl, smiling with his eyes.

"Man trouble," said the girl. "She was being bothered by a man. She didn't say much about it but this guy kept phoning her."

"Name, please?"

"Veronica," smiled the girl.

"No, the name of the man who phoned her."

"Oh! Torfin." Veronica looked disappointed.

"Torfin?"

"Yes. It's a Gaelic name, very common on the Orkney Islands and the Shetlands as well. He kept phoning her. I'd hold my hand over the mouthpiece and say, 'It's Torfin for you,' and Sandra would look sick but she always took his calls, never said to tell him she was busy—unless of course she was. This Torfin, he had a pathetic sort of voice—whiney. You'd talk to him for as long as it took Sandra to take the call and by that time he'd given you a headache, you felt

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drained and wasted. It was all poor me, life's against me, all I have is bad luck, I never had a break."

"How long had he known Sandra?" Montgomerie scribbled on his notepad, sensing gold-dust.

"About six months. I remember he first called back in June, but over the last few days he phoned her every day."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"He was a wimp," said another girl helpfully.

"Yes, apart from that."

"She went to Inverness in May, just by herself, for a break. It was the first time she'd been out of Glasgow in her life. Her dad was never that rich and they never went on holiday. I reckon that's what drew her to work in a travel agent's. Anyway, she took a break, went to Inverness off season, in bed and breakfasts, just for a few days. It was shortly after she came back that this wimp started phoning her up."

"Did she say anything about him?"

The girls shook their heads. Then one said, "Well, she once told me that they met in a bar. She couldn't get rid of him, he just wouldn't take no for an answer. Next thing she knew, he phoned her up here. She said, 'I never told him where I worked,' then she spoke to him."

Another girl said, "I remember that day. It was as though she'd told him she worked in a travel agent's but not which one, and he had phoned every travel agency in Glasgow asking to speak to Sandra until he got through to the right one. It probably cost him a bomb, phoning round like that. Unless he was doing it alphabetically," she added as an afterthought.

"Do you know what he looks like?"

They shook their heads apologetically, saying, "No," except for one girl who said, "Yes," and all eyes turned to her. "I saw him once," she said.

"Yes?" said Montgomerie.

"He came and stood outside the shop and stared at her. Sandra said, 'Oh, my heavens,' and went out and shouted at him. He sort of stood and smiled at her—she could've been shouting to a brick wall for all the effect she was having. She came back in the shop and he stood outside for a bit, sometimes waving at her. Eventually he went away."

"Appearance?"

"Well, he was a large man, not bad-looking. He had a thick mane

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of hair and a beard. A bit scruffy in dress. If he put a little effort into his dress, he could have cut a dash all right."

"Clothing?"

"Denim trousers, army-style jacket, good boots, sensible footwear."

"When was this?"

"About two days ago."

"You didn't tell us," complained Veronica, indignant that good gossip had been missed.

Richard King thought Sandra McAuley's bedroom a saddening and pathetic sight. It was neatly and cleanly kept, a few possessions here and there the property of a nineteen-year-old working daughter of unemployed parents. There were dated travel posters on the wall, rescued no doubt from the waste bin at Clipper Travel. There were half a dozen neatly ironed white blouses, one put aside for work tomorrow. In a drawer in a desk King found a bundle of letters.

"We never went in there," said Mrs. McAuley. "That was Sandra's private drawer. I'd come in during the day to put out her clothes and that, but I never went in her drawer."

There was a quality of sincerity and gentleness about Mrs. McAuley that reminded King of his Quakeress wife, Rosemary, a long-suffering girl who never complained. Their home, he was all too aware, was still half furnished and the wood he had bought six months ago to build kitchen shelves for her was still lying in the entrance hallway where he had left it on his return from the do-it-yourself store. Each night he'd come home, sometimes very late, sometimes well after midnight, and each night Rosemary, who wore her hair in a bun and favored longish skirts in pastel shades, would be waiting up for him. She would bring him a mug of tea as he slumped in the armchair and smile as she handed it to him, knowing he was too exhausted to do anything but smile back. She never carped about the late hours, never reminded him of the shelves, or the decorating that needed to be done. "Of course," said King, thinking once again of Sandra McAuley. "Did she get a lot of letters?"

"Yes," nodded Mrs. McAuley, "quite a lot. One every two days or so, usually postmarked Inverness. Then in the last few days they were postmarked Glasgow. It was always the same person, I recognized the handwriting—sort of childish."

King looked at the letter and saw what Mrs. McAuley meant. It was a round, infantile hand, laboriously written, the careful de-

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scribing of each character so neat that they might have been copied from an I Learn To Write book.

The care taken over the writing was the only source of warmth the letter contained. In content it was selfish to the point where King wanted to crumple it up before he had finished. I, I, I, me, me, me. It was a letter wholly concerned with the writer and the writer's problems and what the writer wanted. It seemed to King that the letter-writer's problems were mainly that life was not giving him what he wanted and that what he wanted in particular was Sandra McAuley. They could marry quietly was the suggestion, had she given any more thought to it? She could look after "me." And if "I" found a job which wouldn't be boring to "me," "I" might take it. It didn't surprise King that Sandra McAuley had chosen to keep only one or two letters the writer had sent to her, and even then it seemed more than likely that she had simply forgotten to throw these away.

The letter-writer's name was Torfin and he had even printed his name in full at the letterhead: Torfin McNaught. He had an address in Inverness and a later letter was sent from an address in Kersland Street, in the West End of Glasgow. King said, "May I hang onto these, please?"

"Of course, sir," sniffled Mrs. McAuley, wringing her hands. "Anything to be of help to you."

There was the unmistakable smell of damp in the room, which was beginning to grip at King's chest the longer he remained there. He looked out of the window. The view from Sandra McAuley's room was of an untended grass embankment, a disused railway line, and some derelict buildings.

Fabian Donoghue sat back in his chair and pulled out his pipe. Rain patted against the window. He glanced at the digital clock on his wall: 1830. He leaned forward and again picked up and read the reports King and Montgomerie had submitted. Montgomerie's report was, as usual, little more than skeletal, but in fairness he had, or at least seemed to have, recorded all the relevant information. King's report, again as usual, was more fleshed out, pleasingly full. He had put himself into his report, given it a voice, drawn attention to points of issue, and concluded that Torfin McNaught was infatuated with Sandra McAuley, but—important point—there was not the slightest indication that she was reciprocating, or leading him on, as it were.

Reading between the lines of Montgomerie's slightly perfunctory submission, it appeared that Torfin McNaught had met Sandra

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McAuley in a bar in Inverness and had followed her to Glasgow. Donoghue had phoned the Highland Region Police in Inverness. He had given them the name and the address in Inverness of the man who was prime suspect in the incident which would come to be known as The Hope Street Murder. The officer of the Highland Region Police noted the details and agreed to call back with any information they had. Donoghue had replaced the receiver, lit his pipe, and sat back in his chair.

Ten minutes later, his phone rang with its pleasantly soft warbling tone. "Highland Police at Inverness for you, sir," said the voice at the switchboard.

There was a click on the line and a rich North East Scotland accent said, "Good evening, sir—Detective Sergeant Forsyth speaking. You were, I understand, making inquiries about Torfin McNaught?"

"I was indeed." Donoghue picked up his pen and held it poised over his notebook. "Anything you can let us know?"

"Well, he's known to us, sir," said Forsyth, "and has a string of previous convictions as long as your arm—two sheets of them, I see, all for crimes against the person."

"All crimes against the person?" Donoghue sat upright.

"All," repeated Detective Sergeant Forsyth. "He's quick with his fists and anything else he can lay his hands on—broken bottles, lengths of wood. He's been fined, been on probation, and not surprisingly has done a fair amount of time."

"What's his background?"

"Only child who has lived with his mother all his life. Still does when he's at liberty. Though we now understand that he has moved to Glasgow?"

"That seems to be the case," said Donoghue, taking notes.

"A report here in his file, which was compiled by a probation officer, informs that his father died when he was young and it was more or less him and his mother from day one. There's recording here that when he first came to our attention he was fined by the Inverness sheriff and that his mother must have paid the fines for him, telling him that she had put them back through the Court—whatever she meant by that—because some years later he approached his probation officer and dropped a bundle of fine notices on the officer's desk and told him to 'put them back through the Court,' like his mother had done."

Donoghue groaned.

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"The probation officer records a feeling of unease in McNaught's company, a feeling that McNaught believes himself to be the center of the universe."

"It fits well into a pattern." Donoghue rested his pen on the pad. "We're looking for him in connection with a murder. The indications are that death resulted from loss of temper rather than premeditation. In over twenty years as a police officer it's been my experience that all murders are committed by people who think the sun shines just for them. That includes the so-called crimes of passion."

Forsyth was silent for a second or two. "That's an interesting observation, sir. I've investigated one or two murders and I can't think of one of them that would contradict your observation."

"Well, I thought that I had better get some sense of him before we knock on his door and invite him over for a chit-chat."

"Delighted to be of assistance," said Forsyth. "I see that he did time in Inverness nick and there's an interesting report here which gives an insight into his attitude. It was, I believe, the first time he'd been inside and he was sentenced to two years for aggravated burglary. Apparently he took a fancy to a neighbor's television set, walked in, and carried it out. When the neighbor objected, McNaught laid him out."

"Nice boy," mumbled Donoghue.

"Well, he'd been inside for a few days and it reads as though the novelty wore off, because he walked up to the senior hall officer and said, 'I don't like it in here—you can send me home now, I'll behave.' The hall officer put him right about a few things, such as sentence of the Court and the Rule of Law, and McNaught ran amok. They carried him into the cooler and he screamed the place down and threw his food about."

"Age?" asked Donoghue.

"Now forty-two," said Forsyth, "just coming up forty-three."

"My heavens." Donoghue was genuinely dismayed. "The girl we believe he murdered was just nineteen. They met in a bar in Inverness when she was on her first and only trip out of Glasgow."

"He followed her back to Glasgow?"

"Must have done, after writing a good many letters to her. I haven't yet found out how he got her address, but there are quick and easy methods of doing that—telephone directory, register of electors, any number of ways. There is no indication that she encouraged him in any way."

"He wouldn't need encouraging," said Forsyth. "I met him once,

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briefly, and that was enough. He'd say 'I want' and wouldn't understand the word 'no'."

Kersland Street is in the West End of Glasgow. It is the center of bed-sit land, of bohemia, where old Volkswagens and vans and motorcycles line the curbs and rubber plants sit in the windows. It is a long street of tall tenements and it rises up to the University buildings. Donoghue took Malcolm Montgomerie with him, believing that Montgomerie's size would be useful. He also took with him six men and a sergeant, for much the same reason that he took Montgomerie.

He led the police officers up the winding stone stairway, noting the name on each door as he passed. Some were single-family dwellings with the surname embossed on a brass plate, worn and shiny with years of polishing. Others were also single names but on a cheaper, plastic, tartan-patterned badge. It was when Donoghue came to a flat which had been broken into bed-sits that he stopped.

There were some half dozen names on the door, all printed or typed and stuck one under the other onto the side of the door with clear tape. All except one name. That one was printed in large letters, each written in a laborious hand on a sheet of paper and pinned to the center of the door. The name was McNaught. Donoghue pressed the bell and, not hearing it ring, rapped the old metal knocker. The door was opened by a slightly built, bespectacled young man. He blinked at Donoghue and then at the police officers behind Donoghue. Color drained from the young man's face and Donoghue knew that the man had been up to something, but whatever it was it did not, at that particular time, interest him. The boy was probably in possession of a few grams of cannabis, judging by the heavy, sickly smell of incense coming from the flat.

"We're looking for Torfin McNaught," said Donoghue. The young man was visibly relieved. "He's not here—he left this afternoon. Well, not that long—maybe an hour or two ago."

"Did he say where he was going?"

The young man shook his head. "He never spoke to us. We kept out of his way—the mad Highlander, we called him. A real bampot, ordering us about, helping himself to what he fancied but nobody could touch anything of his."

"Which was his room?"

The boy indicated a door on the left side of the hall and stepped back to allow the cops to enter.

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McNaught's room was small, barely big enough for a bed, a wardrobe, and a chest of drawers. It seemed to have been vacated in a hurry. The drawers were hanging open and one or two possessions had been left behind. On the crumpled sheets and blankets of the narrow bed were perhaps two dozen photographs, all of the same subject: Sandra McAuley. Most were taken from a long distance, some from a shorter distance when she would be walking away from the camera. Two were shots of Sandra entering her parents' house in Haghill, clearly taken during the summer months.

McNaught had obviously followed Sandra to Glasgow shortly after meeting her in Inverness, found out where she worked by process of elimination, and, having discovered where she worked, followed her home one evening and learned her home address. He had then returned to Inverness and sent her letter upon letter. Donoghue doubted she replied much, if at all, but McNaught's obsession had not diminished and he had returned to Glasgow five days before Christmas and, whatever was the intention of the confrontation, killed her.

"What was he wearing when he left here?" asked Donoghue of the young man, reaching for an Intercity timetable for services to the East Coast from Glasgow that was on the chest of drawers.

"Army combat jacket, woollen pullover, yellow woollen hat. He looked ridiculous. He was carrying a blue-canvas holdall."

Donoghue glanced at his watch. It was 1940. The next train to Inverness departed Glasgow Queen Street at 2000. "Sergeant," he said, "get on the radio!"

In the detention room at Queen Street Station, Donoghue dropped one of the photographs of Sandra McAuley on the table in front of Torfin McNaught, the state of whose dress indicated that he had not cooperated with the Railway Police, who would doubtless have first asked him to "come quietly." McNaught looked at Donoghue and said, "I asked her to kiss me, and I said please. It would have been all right if she had just kissed me."

Then he smiled as if, thought Donoghue, he wanted to make friends. It was an image that was to stay with Donoghue—the smile that did not at all gel with the look in the eyes, and the cheeks and forehead heavily and deeply criss-crossed with long scratch marks.

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$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME_____

FIRM (NAME IN AD)_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

PHONE:_____ **DATE:**_____

YOUR SIGNATURE_____

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each
Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ _____
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(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months = $144.00 x .85 = $122.40)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

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HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS: Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each.: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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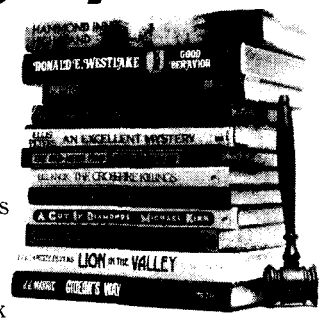

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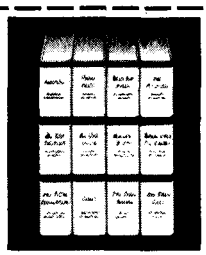

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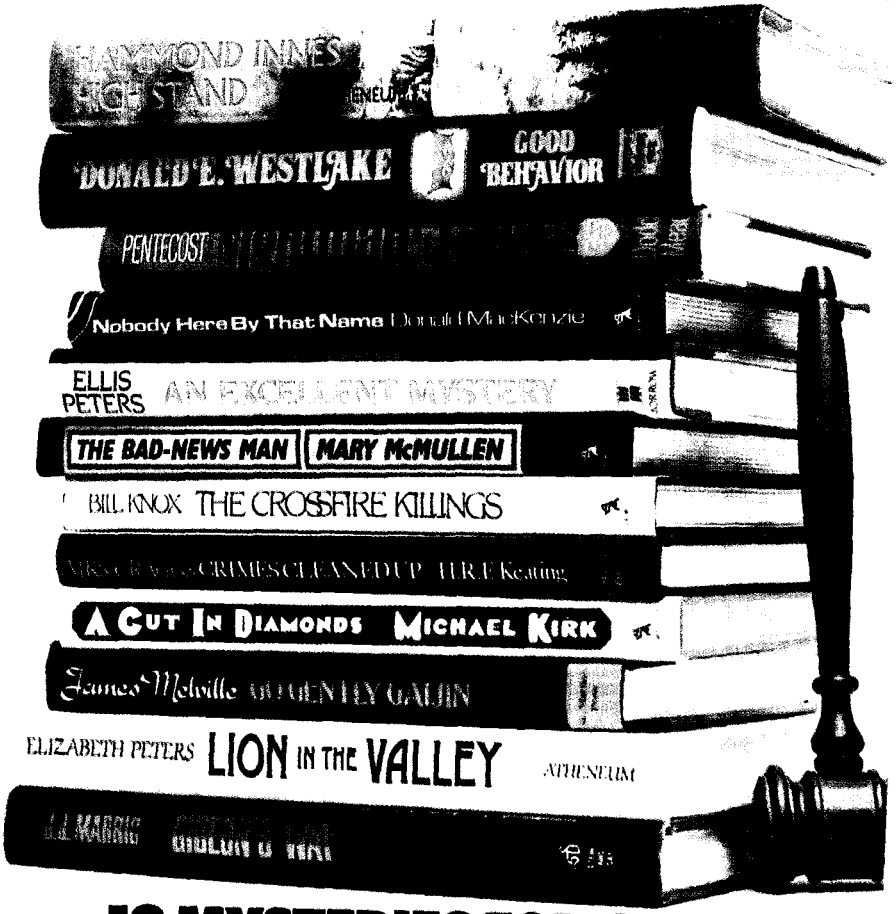

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